

# **THE WORKING WOMEN AND POPULAR MOVEMENTS IN BENGAL**



**Sunil Sen**

In our elitist historiography the working women have remained invisible, although they played not a mean role in the popular movements. This book, written by a distinguished economic historian who was for years an activist in peasant movements, focusses on the rise and growth of the women's movement in Bengal, the problems faced by the working women in a male-dominated society and the perspective of the women's movement in the present situation.

This book based on a wide range of sources is the first book of its kind that has been published in this terminal year of the Women's Decade. Throughout the book the emphasis is on the part played by women's organizations in bringing radical ideas among the labouring women.

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THE WORKING WOMEN  
AND  
POPULAR MOVEMENTS IN BENGAL

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The Working Women  
and  
Popular Movements in Bengal

*From the Gandhi era to the Present Day*

Sunil Sen



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CALCUTTA



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*To  
The Memory of  
Dipsari Singh and Bhandani Burman  
Two Rajbansi Women  
Who left an indelible impression on my mind*

## *Preface*

My object is to tell the story of the working women who have remained invisible in history. It seems to me that the professional historians have generally ignored or underestimated the role played by the labouring women in the popular movements. Thousands of Rajbansi women in hundreds of villages rose in struggle in 1946-47. These peasant women have left an indelible impression on my mind.

I will remain grateful to the International Labour Organization which supported my project on the working women and popular movements in Bengal. I have drawn on the report submitted to the ILO. I acknowledge with gratitude the permission granted by the ILO for reproduction of two sections from the report: Agrarian Structure and Female Labourers. The opinions expressed in this book rest solely with me.

When I worked on the ILO project I received considerable help from Shimwayi Muntemba and Martha Lontfi; to them my gratitude goes deepest. I must also thank D. Ghai and Zubeida Ahmad for their comments on my paper presented at a seminar in Geneva.

I have been fortunate in the generous help of friends who were associated with this project. Professor Kalyan Datta of Jadavpur University assisted me in writing the sections on agrarian structure and female labourers. Tripti Choudhuri, Reader in History, Rabindra Bharati University, prepared biographical sketches and collected material on Women's organizations. Nirmal Sarkar of the National Library, Calcutta searched for material in the official reports and contemporary newspapers. Some of my students conducted field work in the selected villages and tea gardens. I am indebted to several friends who helped in different ways, in particular to Vina Majumdar, Carolyn Elliott, Christine Furedy, Jhon Broomfield, Alan Smalley, Angana Ray Chaudhuri, Bela Banerjee, and especially Nripen and Nandita Sen who showered their kindnesses on me while I was in England in the winter of 1982. Uma



Sen gave me help and advice in different ways. To the activists of the Women's movement who never failed to give help or advice, I tender my sincere thanks.

S. K. Sen

Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta  
December 1985.

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## CHAPTER 1

### *Agrarian Structure*

Omvedt has related "the rising revolt of the rural poor" in India to declining work opportunities of female workers particularly during 1961-71 and the changes in the mode of production. With the coming to power of the national bourgeoisie after independence, capitalist relations have developed in agriculture. Tenancy has declined, and the problems of agricultural labourers that constitute a rising category have come to the forefront. Although indebtedness, "partial share-cropping", caste divisions remain the features of the agrarian social structure, the objective basis of organizing the agricultural labourers has increased. The struggle of poor peasants, share-croppers and agricultural labourers has now become "the crucial form of class struggle"; the upsurge in these struggles in the last decade has largely contributed to the growth of women's movement. In the present situation, women's movement, to be effective, has to be based not on the middle class but on the rural poor.<sup>1</sup>

Although debate on the mode of production in agriculture seems to be ceaseless, most writers seem to agree that the capitalist form of production in agriculture has developed in some states, notably Punjab, Haryana, Western U.P., Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Maharashtra. In the country as a whole, the disintegration of the peasantry, employment of wage labour and changes in the technique of production seem to be the emerging features of the agrarian system. In all the regions there has been a steady growth of a powerful class of rich peasants, the chief beneficiaries of the development work undertaken by the government; some of the former landlords have embarked upon personal cultivation by evicting the tenants. It is, however, noteworthy that share-cropping has not withered away; the small peasant sector, representing the majority of owner-cultivators, still covers the biggest area under any single mode of production.<sup>2</sup> One may say that small peasant economy will continue to exist for a long time.

When we turn to Bengal, pre-capitalist relations seem to be strong with the result that the pace of development of capitalist relations has remained tardy. Since the colonial period stagnation in agriculture has continued unabated. As Blyn's study on agricultural output shows, there was a steep rate of decline in rice yield per acre in Bengal during 1891-1947.<sup>3</sup> Let us briefly indicate the main features of Bengal's agrarian system in the colonial period, so that we can comprehend more fully why capitalist relations in agriculture remained weakly developed in West Bengal in the recent period. It is not fortuitous that the Tebhaga movement, spearheaded by the sharecroppers, flared up in Bengal in 1946-47; peasant struggles in 1967, 1969, 1970, were, broadly speaking, tenants' struggles for the occupation of *benami* land (i.e. land transferred by landowners to fictitious persons in order to evade the ceiling law). These struggles of the rural poor brought to the fore the crucial importance of land reform in West Bengal.

Under the Permanent Settlement, 1793 the Bengal zamindars became proprietors of their estates, subject to a permanent fixed payment to the government. The revenue of the government was fixed at ten-elevenths of what they received as rent from the tenants; the remaining one-eleventh went to the zamindar. The structure of landholding changed as time passed. Estates were mortgaged or sold, and a new class of landowners, drawn mostly from traders, moneylenders and urban middle classes, emerged. Many writers have noted the spread of subinfeudation and multiplicity of tenures; there were layers of subordinate tenures, each with permanent, transferable and heritable rights. Some of the big zamindars transferred the responsibility of rent collection to an army of intermediaries. By 1870, Burdwan, for instance, became divided into 4,860 zamindarias, 2,246 *patnies*, and 827 *darpatnies* or subleases. The Burdwan raj survived over the years. As years passed, the landlord became more and more a rent-receiver who benefited from increased rents; rent paid by the ryots increased by nearly 40 per cent between 1914 and 1939. Over the years the zamindars hardly invested capital in large-scale farming. Nor did they embark upon the modernization of agriculture. It seems that the zamindars with their monopoly control of land bene-



fitted from increased rents and thought it wise to invest in land purchase, usury and trade in agricultural produce.<sup>4</sup>

We now turn to the *Jotedar* that became increasingly powerful in rural economy. The *Jotedar* may be described as a ryot who took a prominent part in land reclamation and later turned over the land to *barga* cultivation; the *bargadar* (share-cropper), who had no security of tenure, had to pay 50 per cent of the gross produce as rent, while bearing the expenses of cultivation. Some of the *Jotedars* in North Bengal, as Bell tells us, held "several or thousands of acres of land in their own possession"; in most of the Union boards the presidents came from "the *Jotedar* class with 30 to 300 acres of land"; *Jotedars* often invested capital in paddy trade as well as moneylending. The middle class belonging to the three upper castes (e.g. Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas) clung to landed property in the absence of other avenues of employment, and invariably sublet their land to the *bargadars*.<sup>5</sup> Predictably, the landed gentry had a stake in the status quo. The land to man ratio and the slow pace of industrialization provided the basis for the extension of *barga* in all the Bengal districts. During the bleak years of the great depression (1929-34) when prices of all crops slumped, the number of mortgages increased; very often the mortgagor was resettled on the land as a *bargadar*. As prices rose from 1938 onwards the number of sales increased; landlords and moneylenders apparently dispossessed owner-cultivators that swelled the ranks of agricultural labourers. It seems that these categories made hay in the situation created by the war and showed a tendency to purchase land. The Land Revenue Commission reported in 1940 that 21 per cent of the land was cultivated by the *bargadars*; in 1946, as the Ishaque Report noted, 25 per cent of the land was under *barga*. More land in Bengal was share-cropped than cultivated by hired labourers.<sup>6</sup> The 1951 census data showed a small decline in *barga* in West Bengal, except in Burdwan, Midnapore, West Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri; 40.8 per cent of the *bargadars* came from the scheduled castes and tribes.

We will now examine the Tenancy Acts, cursorily and in passing, to understand why the rent question exacerbated relations between the landlords and their tenants. The Tenancy

Act of 1859 gave some concessions to the occupancy ryots who were entitled to receive *pattas* from the landlords ; *Jotedars* who were recorded as occupancy ryots developed into small landlords as time passed ; half the tenantry remained unprotected. Under the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 the ryot benefited from the provision that he would become a settled ryot if he held any land in the village for twelve years ; there was no provision in this act for treating the *bargadars* as tenants. The Kerr Committee reported in 1923 that the under ryot, supplying plough and cattle and paying produce rent, should be given a limited occupancy right. The Swarajists, championing the interests of Jotedars and landowning middle class, vigorously opposed the proposal of giving "limited occupancy right" to the bargadars. In the face of their opposition the government beat a retreat ; in the Tenancy Act, 1928 the bargadars did not get occupancy right while the rent remained one-half of the total produce. The Amended Tenancy Act, 1938, while removing all constraints on the sale of peasant holdings, led to the extension of the barga system ; the dispossessed peasants were often resettled on the land as bargadars. The spread of barga was noted by the Land Revenue Commission, 1940 which recommended that the bargadars who "supply the plough, cattle and agricultural implements" should be regarded as tenants, and that "the share of the crop legally recoverable from them should be one-third, instead of half". But this recommendation, alas, was not implemented until the end of the British raj. On the crest of the Tebhaga movement the Muslim League ministry brought the Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill in January 1947, but the Bill was subsequently withdrawn. In the State Acquisition and Tenancy Bill introduced in the Assembly in the spring of 1947, there was not a single provision that dealt with the rights of bargadars. Meanwhile the Tebhaga movement had been suppressed. As Mitra tells us, tenancy legislation "resulted in safeguarding only the rural middle class and Jotedar at the cost of not the landlord but the tiller".<sup>7</sup>

The poverty of the small peasants, a high burden of farm debts and high rates of interest paid by all categories of peasants to the moneylenders became the prominent features of

the agrarian system. What needs to be noted is that the poverty of the small peasants was the soil on which usury could grow ; and the usurer had an interest in retaining pre-capitalist relations. The bargadars relied on the jotedars for paddy loan and had to pay  $1\frac{1}{2}$  maunds for every maund borrowed ; the jotedars invariably sold paddy at high prices. With the extension of commercial agriculture, the problem of credit became acute. All categories of peasants were compelled to raise loans to provide circulating capital on onerous terms of repayment. In the jute belt the system of *dadān* (advance taken on hypothecation of a portion of the produce) had become pervasive ; the landlords and moneylenders could thus grab a portion of the peasant's produce at less than the market price. Since the landlords and rich peasants could hold on, they sold jute at high prices, and had every reason to cling to the system of *dadān*. Apart from professional moneylenders, there were landlords, small shopkeepers and rich peasants, from whom the peasants borrowed ; from 1937 onwards the "ryot or Jotedar—mahajan", more accommodating than the professional moneylender, came to the forefront.<sup>8</sup>

With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, there was a rapid fall in agricultural prices. The price of rice fell by 50 per cent in 1933. Jute prices also collapsed ; the average price of raw jute per maund fell from Rs. 9.6 annas during 1920-29 to Rs. 3.10 annas between 1930 and 1934. The price of pulses fell by 45 per cent in 1934. In the face of the collapse of prices all categories of peasants reduced their expenditure. Even so, they turned to the moneylenders who severely reduced their loan operations. The cooperative credit societies reduced their loans by 77 per cent between 1929 and 1933 ; overdue loans increased and numerous societies collapsed. There was a virtual moratorium on debt repayments ; in fact overdue loans could not be collected. The Bengal Moneylenders Act (1934), Agricultural Debtors Act (1936) were designed to reduce the burden of indebtedness. By 1944 the Debt Conciliation Boards reduced the debts of peasants to some extent ; but the Conciliation Boards made little impact on rural indebtedness. In North Bengal, for instance, the debtors did not like to settle, because debts with all creditors had to be settled at once and

the peasants were afraid that they would get no more loans from the *mahajans*. In 1945 agricultural indebtedness was estimated at 150 crores as against 100 crores in 1929 when the Banking Enquiry Committee submitted its report. The moneylender, following flexible procedure, enjoyed virtual monopoly of rural credit. What was a growing trend was, as the Famine Enquiry Commission (1945) noted, that the money-lending business "tends to go to the bigger and really professional men" that hardly showed much elasticity in regard to debt repayments.<sup>9</sup> Usury continued unabated. It seems that precapitalist relations in agriculture were based on the *barga* system and continuous expansion of usury.

On the morrow of independence the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee (1949) emphatically asserted that land reform would be the key to "any lasting improvement in agricultural production"; the Committee recommended ceiling on holdings, radical changes in the tenancy system, organization of co-operative farms.<sup>10</sup> In Zamindari area the landlords did not fail to offer a last-ditch battle against the abolition of the Zamindari system. The Bihar Abolition of Zamindari Act, 1948 was challenged in the Courts; the Act was repealed, and a new piece of legislation, called Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950, was introduced; this was also challenged in the Courts. In 1952 the Supreme Court upheld the validity of this Act which at last abolished the interests of Zamindars and intermediaries. In West Bengal it was not until 1953 that the government introduced the Estate Acquisition Act. Curiously enough, there was no provision for ceiling on the landholdings of intermediaries; the Jotedar, who was a ryot, got a reprieve and promptly resorted to evictions of tenants to bring more land under his possession. In 1954 the government thought it necessary to bring an ordinance banning illegal evictions. Then came the Land Reforms Act, 1955. The Jotedars were at last brought within the purview of this Act; the produce rent recoverable from the bargadar was reduced from 50 to 40 per cent. The Act imposed a ceiling on the holding of a ryot at 25 acres; this provision did not apply to orchards as well as land held by religious institutions and truts.

With the abolition of the Zamindari system changes in agra-



rian relations became evident as time passed. The old zamindar became a ryot, trying to adapt to the new situation, while the Jotedars, clinging to barga, usury and trade, developed as the *dramatis personae* in the countryside. The old zamindars benefited from cash rent paid by the tenants ; the Jotedars continued to receive produce rent from the bargadars and could make a fortune in rice trade in a period when the price of rice steadily increased. It was not until 1970 that the share of the gross produce of the bargadar was raised from 60 to 75 per cent in cases where they supplied seeds, manure and implements. Incidentally, the bargadars did not press for the commutation of produce rent into cash rent. They invariably went to the Jotedars for paddy loan in the lean months. This partly explains why the bargadars did not like to record their name as bargadars ; they were afraid that the Jotedars would no longer advance paddy loan in the lean months. In the 1960s "concealed tenancy" became widespread in West Bengal where "self-cultivated" holdings appeared to be the predominant recorded category. After independence, jute cultivation made remarkable progress in Nadia, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas and West Dinajpur ; the bargadars in the jute belt continued to receive *dadon* on terms stipulating repayment in kind ; share-cropping did not disintegrate under the impact of commercial agriculture. On the contrary, most tenants engaged in jute production were under the share-cropping system.<sup>11</sup>

The question is whether land reforms could satisfy the cravings of tenants and labourers manifested in peasant movements. Since the Act of 1955 imposed ceiling not on the basis of the family, the landlords evaded the ceiling by transferring land to the members of the household as well as to non-existent persons. The result was that the government could not acquire much land for distribution among the rural poor. Under the Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1971 ceiling was at last imposed on family basis ; the level of ceiling was also lowered. The land ceiling was fixed at 2.50 standard hectares in irrigated land, 3.50 hectares in un-irrigated land in case of a ryot who was an adult unmarried person ; it was 5 hectares (17.30 acres) in irrigated land or 7 hectares in un-irrigated land in case of a ryot having a family of five members ; the family consisting

of more than five members could retain 7 hectares in irrigated land or 9.80 hectares in un-irrigated land. This legislation, though belated, was not promptly implemented ; surplus land could not be indentified in the absence of a record of ownership rights ; the former landlords, invariably backed by lawyers, secured injunctions from the courts to prevent the vesting of land in the government. Between 1955 and 1962 the number of small landless tenants as well as small owner operators had fallen considerably, while affluent peasants improved their position by leasing in the land of their poor neighbours or purchasing more land. What is striking is the large-scale eviction of the small tenants.<sup>12</sup>

The decline of tenancy, employment of wage labour, and the increasing prosperity of the market-oriented rich peasants could be related to the impact of irrigation and technology. In the colonial period irrigation was concentrated in Punjab, Madras and Uttar Pradesh ; after independence public investment in irrigation substantially increased in most states including West Bengal, mainly because it had become evident that an assured water supply would add to output even if other inputs remained constant. Combined with improved seeds, fertilisers and new farming methods, it could raise yield per acre. By 1976 the total area irrigated by canals and tube-wells in West Bengal was about 52 lakh acres ; electricity had gone to three thousand villages. As Table 1 shows, irrigation made remarkable progress in the central region, notably Burdwan, Hooghly and Howrah districts, while it was weakly developed in the Himalayan regions. Boro (summer rice) cultivation that was dependent on pump irrigation had increased in Burdwan and Hooghly ; cultivation of *rabi* crops (e.g. potato, pulses, wheat) considerably increased with the extension of irrigation. From 1971 onwards the consumption of fertilisers picked up significantly ; throughout West Bengal the demand of fertilisers became heavy with the introduction of the HYV programme ; even share-croppers clamoured for the supply of fertilisers.<sup>13</sup>

Table 1  
PROGRESS OF IRRIGATION

Items	Regions			
	Himalayan	Eastern	Western	Central
P.C. of deep tubewells, lift irrigation, shallow tubewells to total number in West Bengal.	2.3	43.4	17.8	36.5
P.C. of area irrigated by government canals to total such irrigated area in West Bengal.	0.4	8.1	44.7	46.8

Source : *Economic Review*, Government of West Bengal, 1975-76.

As we have already noted, ceiling was lowered and imposed on family basis under the Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1971 to get more land for redistribution among the rural poor. Till August 1976, 566,417 acres of surplus land had been distributed in West Bengal; a large proportion of land was distributed among the refugees that flocked to West Bengal from Bangladesh. The Left Front Government attached great importance to land reforms, and by December, 1982, 673,452 acres of land were distributed among landless labourers and poor peasants. The Left Front Government also embarked upon "Operation Barga" to give security of tenure to the bargadars; more than one million bargadars (the member of bargadars would be about 2 million) have been recorded. It is quite possible that the bargadars would assert their rights and try to retain their tiny plots of land; the Left Front Government is not anxious to abolish *barga*. The question is whether these small farms could be viable. The burden of debt, low prices of crops and high prices of industrial goods could drive the bargadars to the wall; and they could lease out their land to their rich neighbours. With the availability of water rich peasants in the developed regions (e.g. Burdwan, Birbhum, Hooghly) show a tendency of leasing in land from poor peasants; apart from land purchase, leasing—in land from poor peasants has become a growing trend.

As Table 2 indicates, the process of depeasantization had gone forward in West Bengal in the 1970s. While 10.80 per cent of rural households were landless, as much as 30.94 per cent did not operate any land; 22.1 per cent of households did not operate any land, although they had some land of their own. It is noteworthy that 45.18 per cent of households owned land below 0.99 acres, but only 19.79 per cent of households operated land of that size. Apparently 25.39 per cent of households owning less than 0.99 acres had either leased in to enlarge their holdings or had leased out their land; some of them could mortgage their land to the moneylenders. As the size group of holdings increased, the number of operators was larger than that of owners. It seems, therefore, that the size of holding largely determined the viability of farms; in the absence of infrastructural facilities the small farms remained immensely vulnerable.

Table 2

PERCENTAGE OF OWNERS AND OPERATORS IN DIFFERENT  
SIZE GROUPS OF HOLDINGS, 1971-72

PERCENTAGE OF RURAL HOUSEHOLDS IN WEST BENGAL

Size groups (acres)	Owners	Operators
0.00	10.80	30.94
0.01 — 0.99	45.18	19.79
1.00 — 2.49	20.03	21.24
2.50 — 4.99	12.60	15.36
5.00 — 7.49	5.36	6.18
7.50 — 9.99	1.90	2.17
10.00 — 14.99	1.71	1.46
15.00 — 19.99	1.71	1.46
20.00 — 24.99	0.47	0.70
25.00 — and above	0.24	0.70
Total	100.00	100.00

Source : NSS data on landholdings in rural Sector, 26th round.

When we turn to rural credit the problems of bringing in share-croppers and small peasants within the ambit of institutional credit seem to be intractable. The share-croppers



constitute a small proportion of the membership of the primary cooperative credit societies which are invariably dominated by the rural middle class as well as affluent peasants. In the recent period the nationalised banks started supplying credit to the bargadars and poor peasants in a few selected areas. But the banks did not operate in the areas where the bargadars were concentrated ; very often these banks tried to apply viability tests with the result that the short-term crop loan programme went awry. As the Rural Credit Review Report (1969) noted, the overdues at the level of primary credit societies were very high in West Bengal ; rich peasants showed a tendency not to repay loans.<sup>14</sup> Although rural credit assumed crucial importance with the increase in the area under HYV, institutional credit seemed to be oriented towards the affluent peasants, while usury continued to be an instrument of exploitation of the rural poor.

The expropriation of small peasants, expansion of the wage labour force and concentration of assets and income among jotedars and affluent peasants made considerable impact on the social and economic life of rural women. In fact, rural women were dispossessed of land and swelled the ranks of agricultural labourers. As we shall see, the intense discontent of the rural poor was reflected in the agrarian movements in which peasant women played not a mean role. Meanwhile, the displacement of female workers not only from agriculture but also from industry had begun. To the story of the female labourers we now turn.

### Notes

1. Gail Omvedt, Women and Rural Revolt in India, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, April, 1978.
2. For the debate on the mode of production in Indian agriculture, see Utsa Patnaik, Development of Capitalist Production in Agriculture, *Social Scientist*, August, 1973 ; A. Rudra, Capitalist Development in Agriculture : A Reply, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 November, 1971 ; P. Chattopadhyay, Mode of Production in Indian Agriculture, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December, 1972 ; also Indradeep Sinha, *The Changing Agrarian Scene*, 1979.

3. G. Blyn, *Agricultural Trends in India, 1891-1947*, 1967, pp 98, 140, 174.
4. L. S. S. O'Malley, ed. *Modern India and the West*, 1941, pp 707, 710-11 ; M. M. Islam, *Bengal Agriculture, 1920-46*, 1978, pp 189-90.
5. S. Sen, *Agrarian Relations in India, 1793-1947*, 1979, pp 9-13 ; F. O. Bell, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Dinajpur, 1934-40*, 1942 ; *Report of Land Revenue Commission, Bengal, Vol. 1*, 1940, pp 38-39.
6. *Report of Land Revenue Commission, Vol. 2*, p 120 ; A Ghosh and K. Datta, *Development of Capitalist Relations in Agriculture*, 1977.
7. A. Mitra, *Census of India*, Vol. 6, 1951, p 95 ; C. Palit, *Tensions in Bengal Rural Society, 1830-1860*, 1975, p 185 ; Sen, op. Cit., p 201.
8. S. Sen, op. Cit., pp 68, 69, 111-12.
9. B. Chaudhuri, *Agrarian Relations : Eastern India*, *Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 2, 1983, pp. 149-50, 155 ; Islam writes that the Conciliation Boards reduced 50 crores of rural debt to 18 crores of rupees.
10. *Report of Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, 1949, see Ch. 1.
11. K. Bhardwaj, *Production Conditions in Indian Agriculture*, 1974, p 59.
12. Ghosh and Dutta, op. Cit., pp 164-65.
13. Ibid, pp 181-85.
14. *Report of All India Rural Credit Review Committee*, 1969.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Female Labourers*

The *Status of Women Committee Report* (1975) drew pointed attention to the displacement of female workers not only from trade and industry but also from agriculture which employed about 80 per cent of women. As Table 3 shows, women's work participation declined steadily in the colonial period ; there was some improvement in women's employment after the coming of independence ; but work participation of women sharply declined between 1961 and 1971.

Table 3  
WOMEN'S WORK PARTICIPATION, 1911-71.

Year	Female workers as p.c. of total female population.	Female workers as p.c. of total work force.
1911	33.73	34.44
1921	33.73	34.02
1931	27.63	31.17
1951	23.30	28.98
1961	27.96	31.53
1971	20.36	22.64

Source : *Status of Women Committee Report*, 1975.

There was some increase in the employment of women in modern occupations since the colonial period. The growth of large-scale industry opened new avenues of employment for women who flocked into white-collar jobs. Women, hailing from the higher castes, worked as clerks, typists, receptionists, doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers and academics. What is noteworthy is that there was a declining trend in female employment in manufacturing industries, notably cotton textiles, leather and leather products, silk textiles, non-metallic mineral products. In Bombay cotton-mills the percentage of women labourers decreased from 24.6 in 1892 to 14.9 in 1939 and 11.7 in 1946. The reduction in the number of female workers could be attributed to the widespread adoption of night-shift in the mills from 1931 onwards ; women were prohibited from working after 7 p.m. It is also possible that women who married

very young and bore children at an early age were considered to be an unstable part of the labour force.<sup>1</sup> In leather industries there was a general displacement of labour with the formation of tanneries and shoe factories that replaced the village worker. As the use of metal, china and glassware spread in the countryside, there was a steady decline in earthen ware and earthen pottery, resulting in a decline in the employment of women in non-metallic mineral products. There was a large increase in the employment of women in tobacco products. A large proportion of female labourers found employment in the manufacture of foodstuffs. There was a substantial decline in employment in foodstuffs due mainly to milling, dehushing and processing of grain. It is noteworthy that over half the labourers employed in cashew-nut processing in Kerala were women.<sup>2</sup>

Table 4

EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING INDUSTRIES,  
INDIAN UNION, 1911-51 (in thousands)

Industries	1911	1921	1931	1951
Foodstuffs	1,328	946	771	569
Beverages	8	3	6	10
Tobacco and tobacco products	9	12	36	212
Cotton textiles	1,326	1,163	1,166	1,012
Jute textiles	41	52	36	81
Wool textiles	66	43	44	48
Silk textiles	51	28	21	27
Miscellaneous textiles	262	267	142	266
Wood and wooden products	374	299	296	373
Paper and paper products	1	—	—	4
Printing and publishing	1	1	1	3
Leather and leather products	194	184	121	73
Rubber, petroleum and coal products	12	6	16	22
Chemical and chemical products	403	363	280	251
Non-metallic mineral products	76	86	51	61
Metals and metal products	—	—	—	3
Machinery and electrical equipment	—	—	—	5
Transport equipment	—	1	1	5
Miscellaneous manufacturing	37	39	41	52
Total	4,189	3,494	3,030	3,074

Source : J. Krishnamurty, *Occupational Structure, Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 2.



When we look at the country as a whole, the declining trend in female employment becomes evident from 1951 onwards. As Table 5 shows, the participation rate of female workers had been falling in the major cities since 1951. The declining trend of women's employment in factories could be explained by the provision of maternity leave and other amenities, involving extra expenses and the need for rationalization and modernization in the older factories. Mothers found it increasingly difficult to rear children and keep their jobs; mortality was high among women, resulting in reduction of female workers. The male-dominated trade unions hardly showed much interest in the predicament of female workers. As Vimla Ranadive, a prominent leader of women's movement, tells us, membership of female workers in registered trade unions declined from 9.3% in 1960-61 to 8.2% in 1968.<sup>3</sup> Apparently female workers had become chary in joining male-dominated trade unions.

Table 5

WORK PARTICIPATION RATES OF FEMALES (FEMALE WORKERS/TOTAL FEMALES $\times$ 100), 1951-71

Towns	1951	1961	1971
Ahmedabad	7.0	5.5	4.7
Amritsar	3.7	2.8	2.8
Bangalore	7.4	8.0	6.8
Greater Bombay	10.6	8.8	7.7
Calcutta	7.6	6.1	5.7
Kanpur	3.5	3.2	2.4
Madras	6.6	6.3	5.1
Madurai	7.3	9.9	8.1
Mysore	5.6	7.8	6.5
Varanasi	8.6	7.4	3.8

Source : A. Mitra, *India's Population*, Vol. I, 1978.

The 1950s witnessed the abolition of zamindari and jagirdari systems throughout the country, but imposition of ceilings on the holdings of landlords and tenancy legislation were undertaken much later. The ceiling laws passed by the state governments between 1960 and 1970 were sabotaged by the landlords who did not fail to carry out fictitious transfers and partition

of holdings. Out of a total cultivated area amounting to 139 million hectares (35 crore acres), the amount of land declared surplus came to only 1 million hectares (25 lakhs of acres). Tenancy problem remained acute, and rents continued to be heavy; landlords embarked on eviction of tenants to bring more land under personal cultivation. Alongside the eviction of tenants, there was the growing trend of landlords leasing in land from poor peasants. Surprisingly, state governments did little to set up cooperative or model farms. These features of agrarian economy made a deep impact on rural women. The number of female agricultural labourers rose from 14 to 20 million during 1961-71; at the same time the number of non-workers increased from 153 to 219 million. As the table shows, the proportion of female non-workers steadily increased from 1911 onwards. Apparently the impact of unemployment fell heavily on rural women. This would have far-reaching effects on their fertility, mortality and nutrition.

Table 6

## PROPORTION OF FEMALE NON-WORKERS, 1911-71

Year	Proportion of female non-workers to total female population
1901	68.30
1911	66.27
1921	67.33
1931	72.37
1951	76.70
1961	72.04
1971	88.13

Source : A. Mitra, *India's Population*, Vol. I, 1978.

We turn now to the labouring women in West Bengal. As industries developed in Bengal immigrant labour came to settle in industrial centres first in a trickle and later in a flood. The main streams of immigration flowed from Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces and the United Provinces to the industrial area, from Nepal into Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, from Chota Nagpur to Jalpaiguri. In 1895 the Bengali workers formed 53.6 per cent

of the labourers in the Jute mills ; in 1929 they formed 17 per cent while the share of Bihar and UP increased considerably.<sup>4</sup> The continuing influx of immigrant labour in the Jute mills could be explained by the fact that recruitment by contractors and *sardars* fostered a type of regional nepotism, encouraging the concentration of migrants from the same area in the same industrial centre. There is little evidence of the flight of the bargadars and small peasants from the Bengal villages to the Jute mills. Few women came from the Bengal village to work in the Jute mills ; female labourers were recruited mostly from Bihar and U.P. These labourers worked as hand sewers in the finishing department ; they were found unsuitable in the spinning and weaving departments. In 1921 the female workers formed nearly 20 per cent of the labour force ; the percentage of female workers fell to 13 in 1939.<sup>5</sup> In an unattractive industry like coal-mining, labour was recruited from the villages of nearby areas. In 1911 the Santals and Bauris accounted for over 80 per cent of the miners ; in 1944 the Labour Investigation Committee noted that the miners came from "the surrounding villages". As early as 1897 the number of women workers, mostly Santals and Bauris, was 6,618 ; women and children worked underground, carrying small coal and dust. The number of female workers declined from 1929 onwards when they were prohibited from working underground ; by 1938 female workers formed only 11 per cent of the labour force in the coal-mines.<sup>6</sup>

It was only in the tea gardens in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts that a large number of women continued to work over the years. In 1911, 64,661 female workers found employment in the Dooars gardens, while the number of male workers was 69,380. In 1944 the tea gardens in West Bengal employed 275,398 labourers, of which 134,886 were women ; the women called Madasias and recruited mostly from Chota Nagpur and Santal Paraganas formed the majority in the female labour force ; only 15 per cent of the labour force came from Nepal. The large proportion of female labour in the tea gardens remained unaltered over the years. In the Dooars gardens in Jalpaiguri district, there were 61,358 male workers, 57,959 female workers and 8,040 children in 1973. Recruitment was

done on family basis ; the entire family was settled on the tea plantations, and men, women and children worked in the gardens. As the Royal Commission on Labour noted : "Factories ask for individuals : plantations want families".<sup>7</sup> Since the rate of wages of female workers was low and they were more efficient than men in tea plucking and weeding, the employers showed a tendency to recruit and retain female workers. Although certain benefits were accorded to female workers by the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 and Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, they received lower wages than male labourers. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 was designed to remove wage differentials ; but female workers continued to receive 17 paise less than male workers. It seems that wage differentials helped to perpetuate unequal status of women in society. They were in the daily rated labour force ; few women were taken on the supervisory staff.<sup>8</sup> As recent research shows, female workers were mostly engaged in production, though as unskilled labourers ; a small proportion found employment as nurses, teachers, sweepers, ayahs, bungalow servants.<sup>9</sup>

With the coming of independence the tea gardens, which were mostly British-owned and British-financed, passed under the control of Indian businessmen ; they took little interest in the rehabilitation of tea bushes and improving the quality of tea, while embarking on retrenchment and reduction of labour. Between 1957 and 1964 the number of labourers in West Bengal tea gardens fell from 261,384 to 195,046 : a reduction of 66 thousand workers. The use of chemical substances had the effect of reducing labour in hoeing and weeding. As many gardens had become sick, the gloomy prospect of unemployment haunted female workers.<sup>10</sup>

As the *Report on the Status of Women* (1975) pointed out, there was a decline in women cultivators from 18.3 million in 1951 to 9.2 million in 1971, while the number of female agricultural labourers rose from 12.6 million in 1951 to 15.7 million in 1971. Generally speaking, women members of small peasant families took part in agricultural production ; with the expropriation of small peasants, the proportion of female cultivators declined. In West Bengal the number of agricultural labourers increased from 17 lakhs to 32 lakhs during 1961-71,



whereas the number of female agricultural labourers increased from about 3 lakhs in 1961 to 4 lakhs in 1971. Thus, the proportion of female labour to total agricultural labour declined from 17 to 12 per cent. What was an ominous portent was the rise of non-workers. In 1961 the number of non-workers was 18 crores of which women constituted 11 crores (61%) ; in 1971 the number of non-workers rose to 24 crores, of which women comprised 15 crores (62%).<sup>11</sup> Apparently, unemployment increased among rural women who were forced to work as domestic servants in Calcutta and other towns, and were entrusted with tasks like cooking, serving of meals, washing, etc. within the family ; they were also engaged in tending domestic animals of prosperous peasants, pounding and boiling of paddy, and selling (often smuggling) rice in Calcutta.

The pace of modernization of agriculture was slow in West Bengal. Nevertheless, it made remarkable progress in the 1970s. With the extension of irrigation there was an increase in the area under HYV from 11 lakh hectares in 1973 to 21 lakh hectares in 1978-79 ; the use of fertilisers and insecticides had spread in the villages. As the survey carried on in UP villages shows, the new technology relying on irrigation, manuring, pest control, spraying of herbicides creates relatively more employment opportunity for male labour than female labour. The Census figures for West Bengal (1971) show that the proportion of male cultivators in the more developed districts was about 44 per cent, whereas in the less developed districts it was 63 per cent of the total agricultural working force. What was the position of female cultivators ? They constituted only 1 per cent in the developed districts and 4 per cent in the less developed ones. The proportion of female labourers constituted 12 per cent in the more developed and 5 per cent in the less developed districts, whereas the proportion of male labourers was 43 per cent in the developed and 28 per cent in the less developed districts. It seems, therefore, that the new technology, ushering in agricultural growth, led to the displacement of female cultivators and created greater employment opportunity for male labour.

It would be interesting to note the ratio between female agricultural labourers and female cultivators in the West Bengal

districts. As the table shows, the number of female agricultural labourer per one female cultivator was generally higher in the developed districts, e.g. Nadia, Hooghly, Burdwan, Birbhum. In the developed districts the demand for agricultural labour was high; small and marginal farmers in these districts released more of their womenfolk for off the farm work; the large farmers apparently employed them in busy seasons. In all the districts, as the 1981 census shows, the incidence of unemployment or marginal employment was very high among female workers.

*Table 7*  
RATIO BETWEEN FEMALE AGRICULTURAL LABOUR AND  
FEMALE CULTIVATOR

$$\text{Ratio} = \frac{\text{female agricultural labour}}{\text{female cultivator}}$$

Districts	Ratio
Cooch Behar	2.92
Jalpaiguri	1.46
Darjeeling	0.24
West Dinajpur	3.98
Maldah	5.53
24-Paraganas	2.54
Midnapore	2.82
Bankura	2.58
Purulia	0.93
Murshidabad	3.40
Nadia	5.31
Howrah	1.97
Hooghly	13.28
Burdwan	9.67
Birbhum	4.16

Source : Census 1981, Economic Tables.

We will try to indicate the incidence of unemployment among female labourers. It seems that most of their labour time was under utilised. National Sample Survey in its 32nd round of survey sought information on how much of female labour was available for additional work. It was found that among casual wage labour in agriculture, 50.58% of female

labourers were available for additional work. But among those who were engaged in household work, only 6.60% were available for additional work. Among those who were self-employed in agriculture, 21.61% were available for additional work while the percentage of permanent employees in agriculture available for additional work was only 2%. The high rate of job seekers among casual wage labourers was an evidence of the seasonality of agriculture. This rate would have been lower if the seasonality of agriculture could be reduced with the intensity of cropping.

There were variations in the proportion of job seekers among women who were self-employed in agriculture. Generally speaking, women who had their own farms would not seek outside job. But economic compulsion could force women of marginal farms to work outside. In West Bengal, 21% of the self-employed women in agriculture were available for additional work, while in Punjab this proportion was only 3.94 per cent.<sup>12</sup> Apparently, social attitudes to women's participation in farm work are restrictive in Punjab.

The NSS in its 32nd round throws light on the extent of disguised unemployment or under employment among women. About 44% of women who were already employed sought full-time work in agriculture. Among those who were engaged in household work, 57% sought part-time employment in agriculture. The percentage of women engaged in domestic work increased with the increase in the standard of living. Women of rich peasant families, mostly Hindus, hardly took part in agricultural production.

Table 8

PERCENTAGE OF FEMALES ACCORDING TO SIZE CLASSES OF MONTHLY EXPENDITURE, ENGAGED IN DOMESTIC WORK

Monthly per capita household expenditure (Rs. 0.00)	Percentage of females engaged in domestic work to those engaged in all activities
30.00 — 69.99	40.12
0.00 — 29.99	52.54
70.00 and above	57.30

Source : NSS, 32nd round, West Bengal : Rural.



Broadly speaking, women prefer household work to employment in factories, because married women with small children could interrupt work when domestic work requires attention; they could also look after the small children; they need not have to work under the supervision of men in household work. It should be noted that all types of work hardly suit women engaged in domestic work. Partly cultural factor explains their behaviour pattern. The following table shows the preference of women for different types of household work.

Table 9

FEMALES ENGAGED IN DOMESTIC WORK WILLING  
TO WORK AT THE HOUSEHOLD

Types of household work	P.C. of females usually engaged in domestic work willing to work in household work
Dairy	28.55
Poultry	34.73
Other animal husbandry	6.58
Spinning and Weaving	11.21
Tailoring	12.86
Others	6.07

Source : NSS, 32nd round.

One may say that labour participation rates of women would increase if rural infrastructure is developed, intensity of cropping is raised and employment opportunities at the household level are created. In West Bengal land reforms have laid the basis for small peasant economy. Unless measures are taken to make it viable and dynamic, it would be difficult to improve the level of living of the rural poor.

In West Bengal female labourers were often paid in kind and cash. In 1980 the Government fixed Rs. 8.10 paise as minimum wages for agricultural labour, but female labourers generally received lower wages than male labourers. The Rural Labour Enquiry Committee reported in 1975 that only 1 per cent of agricultural labourers in India were unionized. In West Bengal the membership of the CPI-dominated *Khetmajur*



*Samiti* (Agricultural Labourers Organization), founded in 1968, increased from 35,055 in 1978-79 to 56,355 in 1980-81.<sup>12</sup> Surely unionization of agricultural labour is insignificant.

Omvedt writes that labour unions in Kerala, Andhra and Tamil Nadu organized wage struggles, while rural agitations in West Bengal included "massive middle and poor peasant agitations for land". The fact is that the Communist-dominated Kisan Sabha concentrated since the Tebhaga movement of 1946-47 on organizing bargadars as well as agricultural labourers for the occupation of surplus land ; in no other state land struggle was so intense as in West Bengal in 1969. Probably the communists hoped that actual land reforms could be implemented *via* land struggles, and land distribution would satisfy the cravings of tenants and labourers. This hope has proved to be illusory, and there is now an increasing awareness of the potentiality of labour union in mobilizing the rural poor.

### Notes

1. M. D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India, 1854-1947*, 1965, p 66.
2. J. Krishnamurty, Occupational Structure, *Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 2, pp 538-40.
3. V. Ranadive, *Women Workers of India*, 1976.
4. R. Das Gupta, Factory Labour in Eastern India, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, No. 3, 1976.
5. S. R. Deshpande, *Report on An Enquiry into conditions of labour in the Jute Mill Industry*, 1946.
6. C. P. Simons, Recruiting and Organizing an Industrial Labour Force, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, No. 4, 1976.
7. S. Bhowmik, *Class Formation in the Plantation System*, 1981, p 5.
8. Bhowmik, op. Cit., p 95 ; P. Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry*, 1967.
9. *Women Workers in Plantations*, 1980.
10. *Report of Study Group For Plantations, (Tea)*, 1969, p 84.
11. *Census Report*, 1961, 1971.
12. *National Sample Survey*, 32nd Round.
13. *Report of Khetmajur Samiti*, 1980-81.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Rise of Women's Movement*

The rise of women's movement came late in the day in this country, although social reform movement, focussing on women's inferior status and social oppression, spread to some parts of India in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is familiar that the Brahmos attached considerable importance to women's liberation ; they accepted inter-caste marriage and sent their girls to schools, some of whom worked as teachers in schools and colleges. But it seems that Hindu society was hardly affected by the social reform movement ; the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act, 1855, Civil Marriage Act, 1872 made little impact on Hindu society. It was not until 1929 that the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed ; child marriage was probably the single biggest factor in perpetuating women's inferior status in a male-dominated society. In 1926 women were given the right to vote. But franchise was narrow as a result of property qualification ; only a small proportion of the middle class women had the right to vote. In this background the AIWC (All India Women's Conference), founded in 1927, tried to mobilize Indian women and build a national organization. Over the years the AIWC remained a reformist organization which seemed to be concerned with social service activities. It was under the impact of the nationalist movement that the politicization of the women's movement began ; peasant women were drawn in this movement, heralding a radical turn in the women's movement. But peasant women remained unorganized. As we shall see, radicalization of peasant women could be related to the agrarian movements that became intense in the last days of the Raj. At last, the middle class-dominated women's movement became linked with peasant women.

The AIWC, the biggest women's organization, had 137 branches in 1934-35 ; by 1947, its membership rose from 5,000 in 1927 to 25,000. Though the leadership was drawn from the affluent middle class, nationalist leaders like Sarojini Naidu,

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Saraladevi, Rameshwari Nehru, Hans Mehta, were associated with it. The AIWC campaigned for extension of suffrage, Hindu Law reform, and undertook social service activities including opening of adult education centres, training of nurses, establishment of rescue homes. In her presidential speech at the AIWC session held in 1940, Rameshwari Nehru noted that the organization had advocated "radical changes in the personal laws of the Hindus", while demanding "an equitable comprehensive law based on the equality of the sexes".<sup>1</sup> Even so, there was hardly any attempt for the mobilization of the working women. Everett tells us that the "life styles and values" of the leadership stood in the way.<sup>2</sup> As Renu Chakravarty, an activist in the AIWC, recalls, the communist workers tried in vain to turn it into "a living mass organization". The Bengal Unit was often drawn in relief work during the Bengal famine of 1943 ; but the annual membership fee was not reduced from Rs. 3 to four annas.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, the leadership was not anxious to mobilize the working women. Curiously enough, Congress women, organized in Mahila Sangha, showed little interest in the AIWC.

Nevertheless, the AIWC gave women's organization a national leadership and achieved limited success in influencing government policy with regard to women's suffrage, education and health. Under the Act of 1935, franchise was extended to more than six million women who comprised  $2\frac{1}{2}$  per cent of adult women ; in Bengal 970,003 women were enfranchised and 2 per cent of the seats were reserved for women in the 1937 elections. As in Bengal so in other states, women contested in the elections ; 8 women were elected from general constituencies and 42 from reserved constituencies ; six women were included in the popular ministries. In few countries in South Asia women served as ministers in the government.

The politicization of middle class women, which was reflected in their participation in the 1937 elections, was largely the result of the nationalist movement in the Gandhi era. The Karachi Congress (1931) adopted a resolution advocating sex equality and adult franchise. Gandhi, insisting on a new role of women in Indian society, said : "In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should

treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality." While emphasizing women's traditional role as mothers and wives within the family, Gandhi condemned child marriage and purdah and appealed to the women to come forward in the struggle for independence. From 1920 onwards middle class women took an increasingly prominent part in the nationalist movement; of the 80,000 persons arrested in the second Civil Disobedience movement about 17,000 were women.<sup>4</sup> In Bengal hundreds of girl students joined revolutionary groups and showed remarkable courage in the face of severe repression, blazing a new trail of women's movement.

During the non-cooperation movement, launched by Gandhi in 1920, there was limited participation of middle class women. Women volunteers, clad in Khaddar saris and Khaddar blouses, sold Khadi cloth in the Calcutta streets. On 7 December, 1921, Basanti Devi, wife of C. R. Das, was arrested. Urmila Devi, sister of C. R. Das, whose husband died one year ago, carried on the campaign for hartal which was called on 24 December on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales and was arrested; the *Karma Mandir*, the women's wing of the non-cooperation movement, was banned. Urmila continued political activity as Gandhi's disciple and remained an activist in the 1930s. In the wake of the non-cooperation movement, politics came in the countryside. In Midnapore district it had considerable popular support; in Contai and Tamluk sub-divisions the peasants, mostly Mahisyas, refused to pay taxes levied by the Union Boards formed under the Village Self Government Act, 1919. Till the winter of 1921 the no-tax movement continued unabated and the government decided not to proceed with the union boards. In the western part of Midnapore, the tribal peasants became restive; the Santals refused to pay rent, seized the tanks and looted fish. The Congress established a strong base in Midnapore, which remained a Congress bastion till the end of British rule. It is noteworthy that the rumblings of a rent—strike could be heard in some districts, notably Rangpur and Tipperah. In Rangpur, a North Bengal district now in Bangladesh, the no-tax movement developed into a movement of the tenants who refused to pay rent to the landlords; Congress volunteers were found helping the police and



inducing the peasants to disperse. In Tipperah the Muslim peasants were ranged against the Hindu landlords and money-lenders ; taxes and rents could not be collected either by the government or the landlords.<sup>5</sup> It seems that the landed middle class was scared by rural unrest. The *Atma Sakti* expressed horror at the prospect of a social revolution : "A social revolution without political freedom will be injurious to a dependent country . . . . . Who will deny that the ire of the masses if once roused against the social oppressions, etc., . . . . . it will consume the whole community like a volcanic eruption."<sup>6</sup>

There was a new wave of the nationalist movement in 1930-33 when the Congress organized the Civil Disobedience movement that stirred middle class as well as peasant women. In the Bengal districts middle class women addressed public meetings, took out processions, donated gold ornaments to the Congress fund. In Calcutta *Nari Satyagraha Samiti* was formed to mobilize women in the movement ; women volunteers took part in picketing foreign cloth shops and organized demonstrations.<sup>7</sup> The movement was intense in Midnapore district, particularly in Tamluk, Contai and Ghatal sub-divisions. Along with middle class women and often led by them, peasant women joined meetings and processions, enrolled as volunteers and sold contraband salt. In Contai, crowds of women took part in the manufacture and sale of contraband salt ; they were invariably beaten up by the police. What was a remarkable feature was that processions of men and women moved from Tamluk town into the villages. In Ghatal crowds of peasants assembled in a village demanding the release of the activists, arrested by the police. There was picketing of schools by girl students. As in 1920-22, the Congress did not organize a no-rent campaign, arguing that it would alienate the landlords and disrupt village unity. There was severe repression ; peasants were beaten up on public roads and made to rub their nose on the ground. Very often entire families became involved in the movement ; along with their husbands and brothers women faced governmental repression and left the village to take shelter in the forest. Even so, the movement did not peter out till 1933.<sup>8</sup>

What was a striking feature of the nationalist movement in Bengal was the rise of the revolutionary movement which

revealed the simmering indignation of the radical youth against British rule. Three British magistrates were murdered in Midnapore between 1931 and 1933. Two girl students, Santi and Suniti, killed the District Magistrate of Comilla in his bungalow, were arrested and faced torture and imprisonment. Bina Das, a Brahmo College student, fired at Stanley Jackson, Bengal's Governor, on 6 February, 1932, was arrested and sentenced to nine years' imprisonment. In the summer of 1930, the revolutionaries seized the armoury at Chittagong, a port town in East Bengal, went to the hills and carried on resistance movement. Hundreds of women were activists or sympathisers of the revolutionary movement in Chattagong. There was Kalpana Datta who worked underground and lived in villages evading police hunt, was arrested and beaten up and sentenced to transportation for life. Pritilata Waddedar also lived underground with the revolutionaries, led the attack on the European Club where the *Sahibs* had assembled, and took poison after her comrades escaped. Ujjala Majumdar took part in the shooting of John Anderson, Bengal's Governor, at Darjeeling in the summer of 1934 and spent years in jail. Broadly speaking, girl students as well as sisters and mothers of the revolutionaries joined the revolutionary groups which had been formed in most districts in East Bengal. Many of these women revolutionaries subsequently joined the Congress or the CPI, while a few lost interest in politics.

In early August, 1942 the Quit India movement flared up as a spontaneous movement in different parts of the country, most notably Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Central Provinces ; in Bengal, the main centre of this movement was in Midnapore. While the students and youth were in command in Calcutta, the peasants played a prominent role in Midnapore. It seems that the Quit India movement became a popular rebellion in Tamruk and Contai. Police stations, Courts and Government Offices were raided by crowds of peasants ; large processions of tens of thousands of men and women paraded the streets. Peasant women could be seen attending meetings and processions ; in some villages they tried to rescue the prisoners ; women volunteers sounded an alarm by blowing conches when the police entered the village. As an official report noted :

"....an effective warning system had been devised, elementary tactical principles were observed by encirclement and flanking movements clearly on prearranged signals; ....the intelligence system is clearly efficient since movements by police and troops are very early known."<sup>9</sup>

In the autumn of 1942 there was an upheaval. Matangini Hazra, a peasant woman and an old Congress worker, who was then 73 years of age, led a large procession of men and women that moved towards Tamluk town; she was killed in police firing and became a legend. At Sutamata, rural women became organized in *Bhagini Sena Sibir* (sisters' army corps); women were in the forefront of the procession that was organized to seize the police station, which was burnt. At Nandigram crowds of peasants tried to capture the police station; the police fired on them, and the retreating men and women burnt government offices. A large procession of men and women marched towards Mahisadal police station; the army fired on it killing 13 persons. In Contai, an old Congress stronghold, the movement was intense and based on the support of the peasant masses. The Khejuri and Pataspur police stations were burnt; the police fired on the peasant mobs that tried to seize Bhagabanpur police station; sixteen persons were killed in police firing. Parallel Congress administration was set up in Tamluk and Contai; *Vidyut Bahini* (guerrilla detachment) was formed with men and women; bulletins were published and circulated; the activists took shelter in the forest and came to the villages at midnight to hold meetings. There was limitless repression; houses were burnt and hundreds of women were raped; 44 persons were killed in police firing on 29 September.<sup>10</sup> The total number of persons killed in police firing in Bengal was 87 and 4,818 persons were arrested. Surely the Quit India movement had popular support.

The Quit India movement in Midnapore was faced with a new situation when a severe cyclone devastated the coastal areas; some 14,500 people and 190,000 cattle were killed, and houses, food stores and crops destroyed over a large area. The cyclone was followed by the great famine of 1943. Rutherford described his personal experience in this passage: "I visited Midnapore district incognito yesterday and saw all the horrors

.... Ominous signs, however, are large sales of metal, household vessels, ornaments, and excessive sales of land... Large crowds were also found trying to get agricultural loans.<sup>11</sup> Thousands of peasants, men, women and children, were believed to have trekked from this district to Calcutta where they died in the streets. What is surprising is that there was no popular movement against the traders and rich peasants who hoarded rice and made a fortune in rice trade.

The Famine Commission drew attention to the causes of the great famine of 1943 that devastated Bengal. The aman crop of 1942 suffered from drought and crop disease and there was a serious shortage of the food supply in 1943. Imports of Burma rice had stopped with the fall of Burma in April, 1942. There was the Denial Policy by which boats and rice stocks were destroyed in the coastal districts; the fishermen who lost their boats suffered heavily during the famine. The military authorities purchased and cornered large stocks. In fact, there was a mad rush for securing grains by the military authorities as well as industrial concerns and tea gardens. Hoarding had become a phenomenon; the traders and hoarders made a profit by Rs. 150 crore during the famine.<sup>12</sup> Prices rose sharply between March and May. In Calcutta, the price of rice soared from Rs. 15 in March to Rs. 30 per maund in May; in the districts there was a sharp rise in prices from May onwards, which was due largely to the operations of the trader-hoarders. The condition of agricultural labourers had deteriorated; there was a decline in employment and their wages were falling far behind rice prices. Professor Amartya Sen writes that an estimate of around 3 million deaths would be nearer the mark than the figure of 1.5 million given by the Famine Commission.<sup>13</sup>

When famine devastated the Bengal districts, women activists of the Communist Party took the lead in forming the *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* (MARS) in 1943, which sought to mobilize middle class as well as working-class and peasant women. While campaigning for the release of national leaders and the formation of national government, the MARS organized relief work. As Renu Chakravarty tells us, "Humanitarian work and political work became one and indivisible".<sup>14</sup> In



1943-44, the MARS seemed to concentrate on relief work while fighting against hoarders and corrupt government officers. In March 1943 a large procession of women marched to the Assembly demanding food and the opening of more control shops; the Chief Minister ordered 100 bags of rice to be distributed to the women. Hunger marches were organized in the districts; women came out in the streets ignoring the opposition of the urban middle class. By 1944 the MARS had 390 units in 26 districts; in Calcutta it had 13 units, some of which were in the *bustees* (slums) occupied by the urban poor. When the second annual conference was held at Barisal in East Bengal, the MARS had 43,000 members; 51 delegates, elected by primary members, attended the conference. *Ghare Baire*, the organ of the MARS, became a popular journal.<sup>15</sup> The leadership was dominated by middle class women who toured the districts holding public meetings and training cadres of the developing women's movement. Since the women lived in backward social conditions, consciousness had to be shaped from above. The leaders played the role of catalysts, helping to remould the outlook of backward women. It seems that few women intellectuals lived in the village to build a movement of peasant women. As we shall see, peasant women were mobilized when the Kisan Sabha organized agrarian movements; peasant women joined these movements along with the men. Broadly speaking, militant agrarian movements and rural women's mobilization went hand in hand. The countryside remained, as always, conservative, and middle class women activists had to face social opposition.

In the 1930s girl students joined revolutionary groups; in the 1940s numerous girl students were drawn in the militant student movement led by the Bengal Provincial Students Federation, a left-oriented organization, that grew as part of the anti-imperialist movement. They became organized in the All Bengal Girl Students Association that set up branches in the Calcutta colleges as well as in the district colleges. Renu Chakravarty recalls how the militant girl students toured the districts organizing girl students.<sup>16</sup> Predictably, the activists had to face stubborn opposition from the family; some of them had to leave their homes to continue political activity; they



generally married party comrades. Many leaders of the MARS came *via* the student movement. Although the Girl Students Association became moribund, the activists continued to take interest in the women's movement as well as in the student movement that became intense in 1945-47.

On the women's movement that developed in Bengal in the 1940s we have the evidence of Manikuntala Sen, one of the leaders of MARS, who has vividly described her experiences in her autobiography. Manikuntala was born in a middle class Baidya family and had her education in Barisal College and Calcutta University; she became connected with the illegal Communist Party in 1938-39. Her political life began as a student cadre who often accompanied Biswanath Mukherjee, the celebrated student leader, and addressed public meetings in the districts; she became a prominent organizer of the MARS when it was formed in the wake of the Bengal famine of 1943.

The MARS received the blessings of nationalist women, notably Nellie Sen Gupta, wife of J. M. Sen Gupta, the Congress stalwart, Jyotirmoyee Ganguly, a Congress worker, Indira Devi Chaudhurani of the Tagore family, Prabhavati Devi Saraswati, noted writer, Babli Sarkar, wife of Sushovan Sarkar, Rani Mahalanobish, wife of P. C. Mahalanobish; Ela Reid, wife of A. Reid who was on the staff of *The Statesman*, was the first secretary of MARS. It seems that communist workers consistently tried to draw in nationalist women so that the MARS could be the common platform of the women's movement. But the nationalist women generally remained aloof. The organizers of the MARS toured the districts, setting up branches and mobilizing women; they addressed women's meetings and led women's processions. In the initial period they relied mostly on the wives of Communist Party activists; with their help they went from house to house inducing housewives to join the MARS. In all the districts the girl students were of much help. Very often a procession of women, carrying banners and shouting slogans, paraded the streets; it was followed by a mass meeting addressed by the leaders. When they moved from house to house they encountered the opposition of the men-folk; in Burdwan town, for instance, a gentleman virtually drove them away telling them: "This is a *bhadralok's* house,

my wife shall not come out to meet you". In rural areas it was extremely difficult to hold discussions with peasant women who remained busy in domestic work almost throughout the day; the leaders managed to talk to them when they were in the kitchen or husked paddy with a *dheki*. Widows were the first to attend group meetings; they had nothing to lose while housewives, engaged in domestic work, did not want to incur the wrath of their husbands. In Midnapore district Manikuntala met Bimala, a slim, young peasant woman who became a widow when she was 13 years of age; Bimala learnt to read and write and emerged as a local leader. In Tamluk, a storm centre of the Quit India movement, a women's conference was held. Though the local Congress leaders were bitter against the Communists who had opposed the Quit India movement, the headmistress of the Girls' School, personally known to Manikuntala, gave her blessings to the conference and allowed communist women to stay in the Girls' Hostel. Peasant women attended the conference that marked the beginning of the communist-led women's movement in this congress bastion. Manikuntala lived among tribal women coming from Hajong tribe in Netrakona in Mymansingh district; hundreds of Hajong women took part in the peasant conference organized by the Kisan Sabha. When the Tebhaga movement flared up in the autumn of 1946, she visited Khanpur where two peasant women were killed in police firing.<sup>17</sup> It seems that Manikuntala, a beloved leader of rural women, hardly participated in the Tebhaga movement that marked a turning point in the women's movement.

### Notes

1. J. Everett, *Women and Social Change in India*, 1979, pp 74-76.
2. Ibid, p. 80; also see J. Everett, Approaches to the Woman Question in India, *Women's Studies Int. Quarterly*, vol. 4, No. 2. Everett writes that due to language, class, caste, social and religious barriers the gap between a rural woman and an urban educated woman leader "seems unbridgeable".
3. Renu Chakravarty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*, 1940-50, 1980, p 199.

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4. Aparna Basu, Role of Women, B. R. Nanda, ed. *Indian Women*, 1976, pp 22, 29, 66.
5. R. Ray, Masses in Indian Politics : The Non-cooperation Movement in Bengal, *Economic and Social History Review*, December 1974.
6. J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, 1968.
7. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1930-33.
8. J. Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power*, 1972 ; also Gallagher, Congress in Decline, in J. A. Gallagher, et al., ed. *Locality, Province and Nation*, 1870-1940, 1973. Gallagher writes that Bankim Mukherjee's amendment for launching a no-rent campaign was lost in the congress session.
9. *Maxwell Papers*, 1942-43.
10. S. Samanta, *August Revolution*, 1946.
11. Note of T. G. Rutherford, N. Mansergh, ed. *The Transfer of Power*, 1942-47, vol. 4, No. 175.
12. *Report of Famine Enquiry Commission*, 1945, pp 93-4.
13. A. K. Sen, Famine Mortality : A Study of the Bengal Famine of 1943 ; E. J. Hobsbawm, et al., *Peasants in History*, 1980.
14. Chakravarty, op. Cit., p 23.
15. *Report of the Second Annual Conference of MARS*, 1944 (in Bengal). Nellie Sen Gupta was the president and Ela Reid the secretary of MARS : the number of members enrolled in Chittagong was 5,700, followed by Mymansingh (4,500), Dacca (3,050), Dinajpur (2,500), Khulna (2,456), Howrah (2,000), Faridpur (1,653). It seems that the MARS was strong in East Bengal districts, while it was as yet weak in Midnapore, Burdwan, Hooghly, Bankura and Birbhum.
16. Chakravarty, op. Cit., pp 10-12. She recalls names like Kanak Das Gupta (later to become Mukherjee), Kalyani Mukherjee (later to become Kumarmangalam), Gita Banerjee of the Labour Party, Sova Majumdar of M. N. Roy's Radical Democratic Party.
17. Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner Katha*, 1982.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Agrarian Movements*

In the autumn of 1946 the Tebhaga movement erupted like a volcano. The bargadars, who formed a large proportion of the rural population, began to store paddy in their *khamar*, raising the demand—*Adhi nai, Tebhaga Chai* (we want two-thirds share instead of half). By January, 1947, the movement spread to 19 districts in undivided Bengal. The Special Correspondent of *The Statesman* gave an eye-witness account of the movement in Dinajpur district: "Dumb through past centuries, he is today transformed by the shout of a slogan. It is inspiring to see him marching across a field with his fellows, each man shouldering a lathi like a rifle, with a red flag at the head of a procession . . . The carrying of lathis is apparently compulsory. 'The party requires that we carry the Red Flag and lathis', one peasant who looked like an aboriginal told me . . . 'It is a sign of our solidarity'. By the party he meant his peasant organization, the membership for which is an anna".<sup>1</sup> The bargadars were at last discarding the age-long habits of submission and obedience to the Jotedars.

The movement was intense in north Bengal districts, notably Dinajpur, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri. In Dinajpur district the movement rapidly spread to 22 out of 30 police stations, reflecting the overwhelming response of bargadars who were mostly Rajbansis, Santals and Muslims. On 4 January 1947 the police opened fire on a peasant demonstration in Chiribandar; Sibram Manjhi, a Santal agricultural labourer, and Samiruddin, a Muslim day labourer, were killed; a policeman, who was wounded, died in hospital. The movement continued unabated. In Rangpur the movement was confined to Nilphamari Subdivision, which had been severely affected by the Bengal famine of 1943. In the second week of January there was a clash at Dimla between the jotedars and the peasants, in which a Rajbansi peasant was killed. About 3,000 peasants armed with lathis and spears, came to Dimla from neighbouring villages; the leaders persuaded the peasants not to attack



the Muslim jotedar who had fired on the peasants, as it could spark off a communal riot. In Jalpaiguri the jotedars apparently beat a retreat and hardly offered much resistance in the first phase of the movement; the second phase of the movement began in Mal and Mateli where it was joined by the tribal peasants as well as tea garden labourers and became almost a popular rebellion.<sup>2</sup>

In West Bengal the Tebhaga movement was intense in Midnapore and 24-Parganas. Despite the opposition of the local Congress that had led the Quit India movement, the Kisan Sabha achieved a large measure of success in organizing the Tebhaga movement in Tamluk and Ghatal subdivision, while Contai, a Congress stronghold, remained quiet. As the official report on disturbances in Tamluk notes, the police force was often "surrounded by mobs including women armed with weapons"; the police force that opened fire on a peasant demonstration was "overpowered by the mob", and "two loaded guns were snatched away from the police party". In south 24-Parganas the movement seemed to be spontaneous in Kakdwip and Mathurapur in the Sundarbans, where the landowners "took little interest in their tenants". The petty landlords, discovering that discretion was the better part of valour, generally yielded to the demand of the bargadars, while big landlords tried to crush the movement.<sup>3</sup> The movement spread to other parts in 24-Parganas after the publication of the Bargadars Bill to which we shall presently refer.

In East Bengal, lacerated by the communal riots, the Kisan Sabha, relying on the support of Muslim peasants who formed an overwhelming majority of the population, boldly launched the movement in a few districts. In Chittagong it achieved initial success in Boalkhali police station where the landlords yielded to the pressure of the bargadars who had carried away the entire produce from the field to their *Khamar*. In Jessore the movement made much impact on the bargadars in Narail subdivision who carried the entire crop to their *Khamar* and chose to "plough the land forcibly". In the contiguous Khulna district the police took prompt action to suppress the movement which hardly gathered momentum. The communists tried in vain to organize the movement in Barisal, a stronghold of the Muslim



League. In Dacca, the movement spread in a few villages in Narayanganj bordering on Mymansingh district that was in the throes of a peasant rebellion.<sup>4</sup>

Almost simultaneously the tribal peasants started the Tanka movement in north Mymansingh under the Garo Hills. Tanka was produce-rent which the tenants had to pay in a quantity fixed by the landlord ; the expenses of cultivation were generally borne by the tenants. The Hajong tenants took the entire crop to their *khamar*, refusing to pay Tanka until it was reduced to much lower money rent. In the face of mammoth demonstrations the landlords and Christian missionaries fled the village. When the police party came to the village to arrest the activists, the Hajongs tried to organize a resistance movement. On 31 January, 1947, there was a real battle between the police party and the Hajongs in Bahertali village ; Rasimani, a middle aged widow, and Surendra Sarkar, an activist, were killed in police firing, while two policemen were killed and their rifles taken away.<sup>5</sup> A vigorous drive was started against the Hajongs, but, as *The Statesmen* reported, "looking for a Hajong in this area is like looking for a needle in the haystack".<sup>6</sup> The leaders including Moni Singh, a legendary figure, could not be arrested.

It seems that the Muslim League ministry could not ignore the widespread unrest that had spread in 19 districts, affecting a large proportion of Muslim peasants. What was a striking feature was the remarkable solidarity of the rural poor, cutting across caste or communal barriers. The Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill was published in the *Calcutta Gazette* on 22 January, 1947, which practically conceded the *tebhaga* demand.<sup>7</sup> Few could anticipate that this Bill, which was never placed in the Assembly, would lead to the extension of the movement. In fact, a new phase of the movement, known as *Kholan Bhanga* movement, began. Those bargadars who had stored the paddy in the Jotedar's threshing floor started to remove it to their *khamar*. It was almost a spontaneous movement which caught on mainly in Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and 24 Parganas. This movement exacerbated tension between small landlords and bargadars, who, emboldened by the Bill, refused to distinguish between small and big landlords. Scared by the

sweep of the movement, the jotedars who had fled the village and were biding their time, launched a pressure campaign. Suhrawardy, the then Chief Minister, referred in his Assembly speech to "the flood of telegrams which have been pouring in . . . complaining of looting from the houses of various jotedars".<sup>8</sup> *The Statesman* reported on the rural tension that was building up: "Some adhiars went further; they removed new paddy already stored in the jotedar's stacks to their own for their share out . . . It is an exaggeration to describe it as looting. But the jotedars, wise also in these matters, lodged charge of dacoity".<sup>9</sup>

In the third week of February governmental repression, which was probably not anticipated, began in full swing. On 20 February came the Khanpur massacre in Dinajpur. As the police party went to Khanpur to arrest local activists, an alarm was sounded by the beating of drums, and peasants collected from neighbouring villages. The police truck, that fell into a ditch, was attacked; 121 rounds were fired and 20 peasants including two women were killed and hundreds wounded. On 21 February the police fired on the peasants at Thumnia in the same district in which four peasants including a woman were killed. On 25 February the Kisan Sabha organized a big demonstration in Thakurgaon town to protest against police firing at Khanpur and Thumnia. The procession was declared illegal; Rani Mitra and Bina Guha, two communist workers of MARS, who had come from Dinajpur town to address the peasants, were served with externment order. As the procession was dispersing, the police opened fire, killing three peasants; two Santal peasants who were wounded died in hospital. The *Kholan Bhanga* movement was organized in many villages in 24-Parganas; as the official report noted, the bargadars came with "agitators 2,000 to 3,000 strong and carried off almost the entire produce". On 7 March there was a clash at Sandeskhali where an armed force had been sent to arrest "a number of looters"; a mob of two to three thousand peasants attacked the police party; two peasants were killed in police firing. In the Dooars in Jalpaiguri district the movement started in February and took the form of the *Kholan Bhanga* movement. It was a spontaneous movement unleashed by the Oraon Peasants; they often received help from the Oraon labourers who worked in the tea

gardens. The Dooars virtually became a liberated area ; men, women and children could be seen marching in processions. What was witnessed was ethnic solidarity ; Oraon peasants and Oraon labourers in tea garden showed exceptional solidarity that could partly explain the sweep of the movement. On the morning of 1 March, 1947 the Oraon peasants tried to remove paddy from the stacks of Khuli Muhammad, a Muslim jotedar of Mal ; they were suddenly surrounded by the police party that opened fire, killing five peasants including three women. It seems that the Oraon peasants were still in a militant mood. On 4 April they tried to remove the paddy from the stacks of a Rajbansi jotedar of Metali ; the police fired on the peasants, killing nine peasants including one woman.<sup>10</sup>

Faced with terrible repression and isolated from the land-owning middle class that remained consistently hostile, the Tebhaga movement beat a retreat. Meanwhile the political wind was changing rapidly. The Hindu Mahasabha had vigorously started the agitation for partition, while the Muslim National Guard had been holding menacing demonstrations in towns and villages, demanding Pakistan. In this situation, when excitement was tense, the Communist-dominated Bengal Trade Union Congress gave the call of a general strike on 28 March, probably hoping that the moribund peasant movement would receive impetus from this strike. But, alas, there was a fresh flare up of communal riots that seemed to be over as the agrarian movement swept Bengal. On the afternoon of 27 March riots broke out in Calcutta, and the army had to be called out the next day. The proposed general strike was called off ; the Tebhaga movement, which was in an impasse, was deprived of working class support, and tapered off.<sup>11</sup> The communal riots continued unabated till the day before independence. When the Trade Unions clearly failed to stem the riots and chose to withdraw the call of a general strike, it was Gandhi who lived in riot-torn Beliaghata and restored communal peace. There was a recrudescence of riots in Calcutta within about a fortnight after independence, which was also halted by the Mahatma's fast unto death in early September. Indeed, Gandhi's charisma is not a myth. Suhrawardy was wise in soliciting his help.

While the participation of peasant women in the nationalist

movement was insignificant except in Midnapore district, tens of thousands of peasant women in hundreds of village were in the thick of the Tebhaga movement. In most of the centres of the movement, peasant women, armed with lathis and shouting the familiar slogan "*Tebhaga Chai*", marched in processions, joined Kisan Sabha volunteers in carrying the crop to their *khamar*, gave shelter to underground activists. What is noteworthy is that they often acted independently, took decisions, surrounded the police force and organized warning systems in the villages. When the movement was in full swing they became organized in *Mahila Samiti*, emerged as local leaders, and boldly complained of wife beating, demanding better treatment from the husbands who looked upon them as mere objects. Widows, who had nothing to lose and everything to win, remained in the forefront, while young unmarried girls were chary in joining the movement. In all the regions women of poor and middle peasant families took part in the movement; though rich peasants participated in the movement, their wives and sisters were seldom seen in meetings and demonstrations. As the sociologists tell us, relations between men and women in a poor peasant family are more equal owing to their common hardship and poverty, while women in affluent peasant families enjoy little freedom.<sup>12</sup>

In North Bengal districts the activists coming from Rajbansi women often played the leading role. In Dinajpur there was Dipsari Singh, a tall, middle-aged widow, who, waving a *lathi*, chased the policemen, armed with rifles; Bhandani, a young married girl, snatched away the gun from the *daroga* who was overpowered and confined in a house; Jasoda, mother of two children, joined the Khanpur demonstration and was killed in police firing; at Thumnia the wife followed her husband who rushed towards the police party and was killed along with her husband. In Debiganj in Jalpaiguri district Punneswari Debba, a Rajbansi widow, took out a procession of women as the men, watching the situation, had not dared to start the movement. In Midnapore the Mahisya women who had been politicized in the nationalist movement joined the Tebhaga movement in large numbers, ignoring the bitter opposition of the local Congress, Bimala Maji, whom we have already met, led women volunteers



in surrounding the police party, and became a local leader. There was a turning-point in her life when Bimala, a widow, married a local activist of the Kisan Sabha. Other activists came from peasant women who had apparently lost faith in the Congress. The Tebhaga Movement brought new wind in the Sundarbans in 24-Parganas. It was a rising of the rural poor, living in backward social conditions, humiliated and sick with fear for decades. Waving the Red flag, the peasant women, mostly illiterate, marched in the villages along with the menfolk, shouting slogans. There was a marked change in the social status of the peasant women, as they resisted the landlords who very often used them to fulfil their sexual needs. What was witnessed in the Dooars in Jalpaiguri was the massive participation of Oraon women who accompanied the menfolk in raiding jotedar's stacks and facing the armed policemen; four women were killed in police firing. One of them was Mangro Oraoni, who tried to snatch away the gun from a policeman and was killed. There was Poko Oraoni, a tall, young, lively girl, who tied a policeman to a tree. She married Arjun Oraon, a man of her choice; when Arjun deserted her, Poko, lively as always, lived with another man and continued to mobilize women in agrarian movements.<sup>13</sup> The Hajong women, associated with the Kisan Sabha for years, played not a mean role in the Tanka movement. When the police raped two Hajong girls and dragged away Saraswati, a handsome young girl, Rasimani with a dagger in her hand rushed forward, shouting for help; the male volunteers followed her, and there was a battle on the banks of the river. Rasimani was killed in police firing along with Surendra; two policemen were also killed. Then followed a virtual reign of terror. While the men took to the hills, the women stayed on in the villages. As *The Statesman* reported, they "scold the police when they come. Fearlessly they go to the bazaars to sell their wares".<sup>14</sup>

The agrarian struggle made a deep impact on the peasant women, notably Rajbansi and tribal women. Partly this can be explained by the fact that they enjoyed greater freedom than Hindu and Muslim women. The Rajbansi women moved freely in the *hats*, selling vegetables and rice; widow-remarriage was allowed; the man marrying a Rajbansi girl had to pay bride



price. As Verrier Elwin tells us, in tribal society males "alone can possess", while women "neither inherit nor receive shares on partition". But in social life there was a great deal of equality between men and women. Generally speaking, a wife and a husband ordered their family affairs as equals; widow remarriage and divorce were allowed.<sup>15</sup> The peasant women in Midnapore came not only from Mahisyas but also from Kaibartas, Bagdis, Sadgops, Bhumijis, Haris and Lodhas. Throughout Midnapore the Mahisyas occupied an important position in rural society, since they were allround efficient farmers resembling the Jats in Northern India; they migrated with entire families in the 24-Parganas, where they reclaimed swamps and water-logged areas; they also worked in mills and factories in Howrah and Hooghly. One may say that the Mahisyas had the largest contacts with the outside world.

The records of beating up, wounding of men and women, criminal assault on women made an ugly picture. According to the report of the Kisan Sabha, women were raped in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Midnapore and 24-Parganas. In the last phase of the movement enthusiasm of the peasant women waned and their participation in meetings substantially declined. There is little evidence to show that middle class "*Didis*" of MARS went to the village to regroup the forces. Apparently, the women gained nothing from this movement. But the fact has to be admitted that the agrarian movement awakened thousands of peasant women to political life; there was the growth of political consciousness that became evident as time passed. The movement revealed that the revolutionary energy of peasant women was unharnessed, and the MARS began to pay more attention to draw in the labouring women in the democratic movement. This was demonstrated in 1948-50 when the Communists embarked on an insurrectionary path.

On the morrow of independence the Communist Party of India, which adopted a new political line at the Second Congress held in Calcutta from 28 February to 6 March, 1948, came to the conclusion that India was in the throes of a revolution and could by-pass the stage of bourgeois democratic revolution and reach socialism via armed revolution; the basic assumption was that the Government headed by Nehru, based

on the collaborationist bourgeoisie, would link itself with "the Anglo-American block of imperialist powers".<sup>16</sup> It was in this phase that the communist workers in MARS as well as in Students Federation, sustained by the faith that their revolutionary struggle would lead to the overthrow of the bourgeois state, were at their best. Renu Chakravorty rightly states : ".... They proved themselves to be implacable determined fighters, whom neither police bullets nor Jail could frighten". The MARS was declared illegal. Many activists lived underground, evading police hunt and maintaining contact with the activists who remained open and secretly published *Ghare Birey* that had been banned. A few activists including Manikuntala went to the village. Hundreds of activists including Manjusri Devi, niece of Rabindranath Tagore, were arrested, while middle class as well as peasant women were killed in police firing. As Chakravorty put it : "At no other time had so many women fallen victim to police bullets".<sup>17</sup>

On 27 April, 1949 the MARS held a meeting in Calcutta and organized a women's demonstration demanding the release of the political prisoners ; the police fired on the procession, killing four middle class activists—Latika Sen, Pratibha Ganguli, Geeta Sarkar, Amiya Datta. Manikuntala, who went underground, first came to Bara Kamalapur, a Kisan Sabha stronghold in Hooghly district, where peasant women kept a watch and blew conches when the police entered the village ; she held secret meeting of peasant women and left for Kharagpur to mobilize female workers in the proposed railway strike on 9 March. Loyal to the Party, she hoped that the country would be paralysed by railway strike on 9 March. But, alas, the strike was a flop and trains duly arrived at Kharagpur. More trouble was in store for her. Suddenly the police surrounded her shelter ; she was arrested and detained in Midnapore Jail.<sup>18</sup> A few girl students showed remarkable courage. Ila Mitra, who was born in a middle class Baidya family and married an activist of the Kisan Sabha, went to the village and lived among the tribal peasants in Nachole (now in Bangladesh), who lovingly called her *Rani* (Queen). Four policemen were killed and there was a reign of terror in Nachole. Ila was arrested and tortured by the policemen in the local police

station. When produced in the Court, Ila told her horrid story. She was incarcerated in jail; her health broke down and she was released from Pakistan Jail in 1955. Another activist was Nirupama Chatterjee, daughter of a railway employee, who at the age of sixteen was drawn in the militant peasant movement; she mobilized peasant women in Bagnan in Howrah district, was arrested and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment.<sup>19</sup>

In the meantime peasant women had been drawn in militant movements in the face of ruthless repression pursued by Congress raj. It seems that women generally remained in the van of the demonstrations facing armed police. In February 1949 peasants in Masila village in Howrah district, who had been agitating for tebhaga, organized a demonstration on which the police fired, killing four women including Monorama, a fourteen-year old girl. In September there was another clash between the women and the police in Hatal village in which eight women, mostly Mahisyas, were killed. In Dubir Bheri in Hooghly district the police fired on a women's procession killing six women. None of these martyrs were party members. The Communists tried to organize militant struggles in Midnapore, one of the centres of the Tebhaga movement. Bimala, who had emerged as a local leader, went into hiding and moved in the villages, mobilizing peasant women; she was arrested and put in jail. There was Jyotsna Bhowmick who was born in a Mahisya jotedar family and became involved in the agrarian movement. After the arrest of her husband Kanai Bhowmick (currently a minister in Left Front Government), she used to give shelter to underground leaders. When the police surrounded the village to arrest the absconding leaders, some three to four hundred women, armed with household implements, faced them and refused to disperse. Fortunately the police did not fire on them. Jyotsna, who was among these women, was arrested and sent to prison where she was united with Bimala and Manikuntala; within jail they went on a hunger-strike demanding the status of political prisoners.<sup>20</sup> It seems that Dinajpur, where the Tebhaga movement was intense, remained relatively quiet. Chiyar Shai Shekh and Hopan Mardi, the local leaders of Khanpur, were

killed in police firing, and the Kisan Sabha was virtually wiped out in Khanpur; in Thakurgaon demoralization had set in after the firing on peasant's procession in Thakurgaon town. Even so, Rani Mitra went to the village and remained in hiding; she was joined by Bhandani and Jaymani, who had come to the fore during the Tebhaga movement and had become party members. Bhandani took part in a procession and continued to give shelter to the activists; she died in the summer of 1949. Rani Mitra and Jaymani tried to organize peasant women in west Thakurgaon where a landlord was beaten up; as the police surrounded the village they took shelter in a Bihar village. Jaymani did not come back, while Rani was sent to Midnapore where she managed to evade arrest.<sup>21</sup>

It was in Kakdwip, a new base, that the Communists gave their blessings to the forcible expropriation of the landlords. The Kisan Sabha was formed in this backward region in 1944-45; the rural poor vigorously supported the Tebhaga movement in 1946-47. In the winter of 1948 the police set up camps in the villages; the landlords who retreated during the Tebhaga movement seemed to be determined to teach the bargadars a lesson. Ejectment notices were duly served on them. In the summer of 1949 the village squads, armed with lathis and spears, raided the *kutcheries* and seized paddy, cattle, utensils and cloth; about 5,000 bighas of land were seized by the rural poor. At this point women were taken in the village squads; they took part in processions and blew conches when the landlord's agents or police entered the village. Ila Bose, a medical student of Calcutta, came to Kakdwip along with her college friend Purnendu Ghosh, also a medical student; dressed like a widow she moved in the village, drawing in peasant women in the village squads. A few landlords and their agents were killed. There was limitless repression; the police raided the villages, raped women, and 17 peasants including four women were killed in police firing in Chandanpiri and Budhakhali. From Chandanpiri came Ahalya Das, an activist, who led a peasant's demonstration and was killed in police firing. Sarojini was killed in police firing along with her brother Aswini Das, an activist of the Kisan Sabha; Suryamani Giri was wounded and taken to hospital



where her right hand had to be amputated. Though the Kakdwip struggle was crushed, some of the prominent leaders including Kansari Halder (who later became a member of Parliament) could not be arrested; Ila managed to escape with the help of peasant cadres, while Purnendu was arrested and kept in prison for over a year.<sup>22</sup>

For nearly three years the Communists tried to unleash militant struggles which hardly received any spontaneous support. Yet they seemed to be slow to recognize the realities of the situation. In the summer of 1950, the Central Committee of the Party elected at the Second Congress was replaced by a new leadership. Rejecting the model of the October revolution, to which the Party had been wedded since its formation, the new leadership clearly advocated the Chinese path that had been vindicated in the victory of the Chinese revolution in October, 1949. This line was criticised by three important leaders of the Party, Ajoy Ghosh, S. A. Dange and S. V. Ghate, who submitted a long document. It was pointed out that "there are practically no peasant unions" which "have been practically wiped out, except in certain small areas in Bihar, Bengal and U.P."; only in Telangana "the peasant movement has reached the level of uprising". They emphatically asserted that the party "over estimated the maturity of the situation . . . and indulged in adventurist action".<sup>23</sup> The Communists participated in the first general elections held in 1952 and did well in most of the centres of the peasant movement. The struggles in Kakdwip and Telangana were withdrawn.

From 1952 onwards the Party sought to tread the parliamentary path, while organizing partial struggles of peasants. Peasant revolution became a remote ideal. It is noteworthy that some of the prominent leaders of MARS, notably Renu Chakravorty, Manikuntala Sen, Ila Mitra, were elected to the Indian Parliament and Bengal Assembly. Some of the militant activists found employment in schools and colleges; Ila Bose went back to medical college. After her release from jail, Manikuntala was elected to the Assembly, married Jolly Kaul, a prominent communist leader, and lived mostly in Calcutta, while continuing to take interest in the MARS.<sup>24</sup> The radical



phase of the movement had ended. One may say that a turning-point had come in the women's movement.

### Notes

1. Peasant Unrest in North Bengal, *The Statesman*, 19 March, 1947.
2. See the present writer's *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*, 1946-47, 1972.
3. *Subdivisional Officer's report on relation between bargadars and their landlords*, Memo. No. 1788, March, 1947 (hereafter referred as SOR).
4. SOR, Chittagong, Jessore, Khulna, Dacca.
5. P. Gupta, *Mukti Yuddhe Adibasi*, 1954; S. Sen, op. Cit., p 41.
6. Tribal Unrest in North East Bengal, *The Statesman*, 25 March, 1947; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 March, 1947.
7. The provisions of the Bill have been reproduced in Sen, op. Cit., p 48.
8. Suhrawardy's statement, *Assembly Proceedings*, Vol. 72.
9. *The Statesman*, 19 March, 1947.
10. S. Sen, *Peasant Movements In India*, 1982, pp 114, 115, 116.
11. *Ibid*, p 117-18.
12. J. Arens and J. Beurden, *Jhagrapur*, 1977. While the male member produces food by cultivating the land, the wife processes raw food materials, prepares food, washes clothes in the pond, keeps the house clean, grows vegetables near the homestead; rich peasants never do any household work, while their wives "are not allowed to do anything that has to be done outside the homestead", pp 40-42.
13. S. Sen, *Agrarian Struggle*; also interview with Bimala Maji, Kansari Halder, Poko Oraoni.
14. P. Gupta, op. Cit.; *The Statesman*, 25 March, 1947.
15. V. Elwin, Tribal Women, in D. Jain, ed. *Indian Women*, 1975. Elwin writes; "She can go to a bazaar, even by herself. She can visit his friends. She can dance and sing.... Her freedom becomes somewhat restricted after marriage, but even then she can be herself", pp 208-9.
16. M. B. Rao, ed. *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India*, 1948-50, Vol. VII, 1976.
17. Chakravorty, op. Cit., pp 119-20.
18. Manikuntala Sen, op. Cit., pp 193, 196, 198.
19. Interview with Ila Mitra and Nirupama Chatterjee.
20. *Report of Fifth Annual Conference of MARS*, 1949-50. In the section on past mistakes the report states that the MARS, based on middle class women, was a reformist organization, wedded to a "reformist programme"; what was envisaged was "intense class struggle" in which the oppressed workers and peasants "are to be rallied".

21. Sen, *Agrarian Struggle*.
22. Sen, *Peasant Movements*, pp 166-69 ; *Report of Fifth Annual Conference of MARS* ; Interview with Ila Bose.
23. Rao, *op. Cit.*
24. Manikuntala, though contesting from a Calcutta constituency, toured the districts during the 1952 elections, actively participated in the movement for Hindu Code Bill, was arrested in the teachers' movement and was re-elected from Kalighat in the 1957 elections ; the split in the CPI made a deep impression on Manikuntala who decided to retire from active politics in 1962. *Sediner Katha*, pp 222, 226-27, 239, 248, 300.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Struggle for Land*

There was no peasant upheaval in the Nehru era. The peasant risings which became a phenomenon in the colonial period seemed to have disappeared. Barrington Moore's arguments explaining the decline of the peasant movement are worth noting. The Nehru regime had behind it "the top layer of the peasantry". There was a great deal of modernization of agriculture, and hence the peasantry wanted stability. Moore, while attaching great importance to the growth of commercial agriculture, writes : "Where the landed upper class has turned to produce for the market in a way that enables commercial influences to permeate rural life, peasant revolutions become weak affairs".<sup>1</sup> What Moore fails to see is that peasant movements did not become "weak affairs" in the colonial period, despite the substantial growth of commercial agriculture. It needs to be noted that crucial changes occurred in the Nehru era. With de-colonization nationalism swept the country. The abolition of zamindari and jagirdari system, the tenancy legislation, the enormous public expenditure on irrigation, the slogan of Panchayat raj—all these created illusion among the peasants. As we have shown in another section, capitalist relations were developing, albeit slowly, in agriculture ; with the growth of rich peasants as a social category, the peasants became divided among themselves. There was peasant discontent ; the CPI-led Kisan Sabha organized partial struggles in some parts of the country. But these struggles did not snowball into an agrarian upheaval. The policy of appeasing the landlords and the rural gentry generated peasant discontent, but it was eclipsed by a general sense of increased welfare. Last but not least, Nehru's charisma stood the Congress in good stead in "the dangerous decades".

It was not fortuitous that the Communists debated on the political position that had to be taken in a period when the Nehru Government pursued a progressive foreign policy and launched the Second Plan based on the Mahalanobish model. Bhowani Sen, who firmly advocated an insurrectionary path

during 1948-51, upheld the concept of "united national front", arguing that the Second Plan was "mainly progressive" and that Nehru's policy of "compromise with and reliance on reactionaries" had to be fought by "directing the main blow against the anti-Nehru reactionaries".<sup>2</sup> Some of the important leaders of the Bengal party, notably Somnath Lahiri, Indrajit Gupta, Biswanath Mukherjee, lent their support to this formulation; at the Palghat Congress of the CPI, P. C. Joshi, former general secretary of the Party, submitted an alternative resolution, which was rejected by the Congress; Ajoy Ghosh's compromise resolution, supporting Nehru Government's foreign policy while opposing its domestic policy, was accepted. At the Palghat Congress the entire party seemed to be united in discarding insurgency and pursuing parliamentary path. What was considered to be of crucial importance was to break "the monopoly of power" enjoyed by the Congress party. In West Bengal the Communists in alliance with other left parties had been steadily increasing their votes since the 1952 elections; their seats in the Assembly increased from 39 in 1952 to 61 in 1957 and 72 in 1962. The CPI split in the wake of the India-China war in 1962. Even so, the two communist parties and the other left parties did not fail to unite with the Bangla Congress, a party of dissident Congressmen, and form the United Front Government in 1967 which was headed by Ajoy Mukherjee, the leader of the Quit India movement in Midnapore. After the fall of this Government, mid-term election was held in February 1969, in which the Congress secured only 55 seats. In the second United Front Government the CPI(M) was the largest single party with 88 seats; Ajoy Mukherjee was the Chief Minister while Harekrishna Konar, the veteran peasant leader, was the Minister of Land and Land Revenue.

As we have noted in an earlier section, the programme of land reform proclaimed by the Congress Government could not be implemented in the face of the stubborn opposition of the landlords as well as the rural gentry. In its policy statement issued in 1953 the All India Kisan Sabha viewed "with grave concern the concerted offensive being made by landlords . . . . .to evict tenants and grab their lands", and called



upon the peasants to resist the offensive of the landlords.<sup>3</sup> In the 1950s, the Kisan Sabha in West Bengal held a series of meetings and demonstrations demanding radical land reform, extension of credit to the rural poor, and fair price for agricultural produce. There was no movement for the seizure of land; the emphasis was on the exposure of the negative aspects of government policy. In August, 1959, the Kisan Sabha held a peasant demonstration in Calcutta in which peasant women could be seen shouting slogans; P. C. Sen's ministry let loose a reign of terror, and about eighty peasants were killed. Interestingly, most of the political parties henceforth mobilized women in Calcutta demonstrations. In the meantime there had been a proliferation of women's organizations; all the major parties had their women's fronts. It seems that political parties sought to woo peasant women who had the right to vote thanks to the introduction of adult franchise. What is noteworthy is that militant agrarian movements that seemed to be quiescent began to flow with renewed force after the formation of the non-Congress Government in 1967. In Naxalbari the struggle for land flared up; the two communist parties unleashed land struggles, particularly in 1969. According to Home Ministry report, peasants seized government land and forest land in Assam, Andhra, Bihar, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh in 1969.<sup>4</sup> After the coming of independence this was the first time when land struggles flared up in many parts of India, which reflected, as in a flash, the simmering discontent of the rural poor.

The land struggle was intense in West Bengal, most notably in 24-Parganas and Midnapore. Indeed, there was an upsurge among the rural poor. We will briefly describe the movement in Sonarpur in 24-Parganas to comprehend the pattern of the land struggle as well as women's role in it. Unlike Kakdwip there was no Tebhaga movement in Sonarpur. In 1948-49 the communists tried to organize militant struggles in Sonarpur, in which two peasants were killed in police firing. It seems that the communists had a strong base in this area; the communist candidate was returned to the Assembly in 1952 and again in 1967. Since land reform was not implemented in the past, the peasants launched the movement for the seizure of *benami*

land from 1967 onwards. By June, 1969, about eight thousand acres of land had been seized and distributed among the rural poor ; red flags were planted on the land of rapacious landlords ; tribal peasants were mobilized in meetings and demonstrations. There were clashes between the peasants and the landlords while the police remained neutral.<sup>5</sup>

Almost simultaneously the movement for the occupation of fisheries began. It is noteworthy that the landlords, lured by the prospect of making a fortune in fish trade, converted agricultural land into fisheries ; the area under fisheries was 30,656 acres, which were scattered in Sonarpur, Bhangar, Canning, Haroa, Sandeshkhali, Mathurapur in south 24-Parganas.<sup>6</sup> In 1969 a large number of fisheries in Sonarpur and Bhangar were occupied ; water was drained out and land was distributed among the poor peasants. The owners of the fisheries beat a retreat. As *The Statesman* reported, this movement had popular support not only in Sonarpur but also in Bhangar, Canning and Deganga.<sup>7</sup> This movement brought to the fore the problems created by the extension of fisheries.

Land distribution created problems that seemed to be intractable. As land was distributed among the landless peasants and poor peasants, some bargadars lost a portion of the land previously cultivated by them. Makhan Mandal, for instance, who had fifteen bighas of land under his cultivation, could retain only four bighas in 1969 ; the remaining portion of his land was distributed among those bargadars who held less than six bighas of land. The Government also refused to give occupancy right to the bargadars who could, therefore, be evicted by the landlords. By May, 1969, new problems surfaced. The landlords refused to give paddy loans to the bargadars for subsistence ; institutional credit was not available for them, since they were not owner cultivators. As the fisheries were converted into cultivable land, the labourers who found employment in these fisheries became unemployed. What was an ominous portent was that violent clashes between CPI(M) and other left parties including CPI assumed serious proportions, which gave a handle to the Central Government to impose President's rule in West Bengal in March, 1970. The CPI(M) became the target of repression ; some of the activities

were forced to take shelter in Calcutta. Predictably, the landlords seized the opportunity and tried to occupy the land.<sup>8</sup>

From 1967 onwards peasant women were mobilized in land struggles. It seems that the Kisan Sabha extended its base among the tribal peasants; tribal women could be seen moving in the villages along with the menfolk. Some of the women became local leaders. Bidasi Mondal, a widow, who was an agricultural labourer, organized tribal women as well as scheduled caste women; they participated in land struggles in large numbers. Another local leader was Chabi Mandal, a childless widow and an agricultural labourer. Chabi got two bighas of land in the process of land distribution; with the fall of the United Front Government in 1970, repression was let loose in the village; Chabi did not get cold feet, refusing to join the landlord's men. As the secretary of the local Mahila Ganatantrik Samiti, Chabi remained active in the women's movement and was elected a member of the Gram Panchayat in the 1983 elections. While rural women like Bidasi and Chabi worked at the grassroots, the leaders came from the urban middle class. Pranati Bhattacharya, wife of Jayanta Bhattacharya, Secretary of the Kisan Sabha, was the President of Sonarpur Mahila Ganatantrik Samiti; the Secretary was Rama Ray Chaudhuri, wife of a local communist leader. Another prominent functionary was Manju Chakraborty, wife of a local communist worker, who worked as a school teacher.<sup>9</sup> The middle class leaders managed to keep contact with the peasant women who invariably attended meetings and demonstrations.

It seems that the Kisan Sabha regrouped its forces in Kakdwip in the 1950s. In this region, which was outside the Permanent Settlement, the *jotedars* with whom the Government settled the land remained a powerful force; they had successfully evaded the land ceiling, so that the land that had vested in the state was not substantial. Broadly speaking, the peasant women, radicalized in the Kakdwip struggle, remained loyal to the Kisan Sabha; hundreds of peasant women waving banners came in a procession when the State Kisan Sabha held its annual conference in Kakdwip in the summer of 1960. With the formation of the second United Front Government in 1969, there was joy in the villages, and the struggle for land was launched.

In this region the peasants occupied fallow land and khas land ; as in other areas land was distributed among the rural poor. In 1970 the CPI-led Kisan Sabha organized the land grab movement in Budhakhali village, a centre of the Kakdwip struggle ; about 150 acres of land were occupied and distributed among landless peasants. In these struggles peasant women joined meetings and demonstrations ; the Mahila Gananatrik Samiti was formed, whose membership increased from 950 in 1981 to 2,350 in 1983.<sup>10</sup> Menaka Maiti, wife of the local member of the State Assembly, was elected president ; Dipali Maiti, sister of the president of Panchayat Samiti worked as the secretary of the local unit. Apparently, the activists came mostly from political families, who received encouragement from their husbands and brothers.

By 1980, 51,957.63 acres of land were distributed among the rural poor in 24-Paraganas ; 38,526.17 acres of vested land were hit by injunction orders of the High Court and the Civil Courts.<sup>11</sup> Land distribution hardly satisfied the cravings of the landless peasants that formed a large proportion of the rural population. It is possible that some of the fortunate peasants who had received land had leased out their land to their affluent neighbours. The names of 117,239 bargadars had been recorded under Operation Barga. There is no doubt that the recorded bargadars would increasingly assert their rights. It is, however, not clear how exactly women benefited from land distribution and Operation Barga. They had not received *patta* ; only heads of the family were recorded as bargadars.

In Midnapore the Kisan Sabha made considerable headway in the 1950s, leading to the further erosion of the peasant base of the Congress. The Kisan Sabha continued to woo the rich peasants so that unity of the entire peasantry could be maintained. But the peasantry was split ; the village ceased to be united. Under the circumstances, the Kisan Sabha came to be based on the rural poor who were in the forefront of the land struggle. In 1969 the movement for the occupation of *benami* land gathered momentum, and numerous clashes occurred between the landlords and the peasants. Peasant women joined this movement in large numbers and constituted about 25 per cent of the volunteers that moved in the villages ; they generally



followed the decisions made by male activists. Numerous meetings were held in the villages. Tribal women, as always, were militant and active. In a village in Kharagpur the rural poor tried to occupy *benami* land; as the landlords gunned down two agricultural labourers, the tribal peasants killed all the five landlords who had fired on the peasants; tribal women chased away the wives of the landlords who had rushed to the village with bullets in their hands. This incident revealed the militant mood of the poor women. Geeta Mukherjee, an activist in the land struggle, stressed the fact that women of the families of the participants generally took a keen interest in the outcome of the land struggle.<sup>12</sup>

The Left Front Government undertook land distribution; by 1980, 142,663 acres of land had been distributed among the rural poor; recording of the bargadars also made progress. While the Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti emerged as a powerful force in the village, some of the old activists of MARS had become inactive or passive. On her release from jail in 1951, Bimala continued to take interest in the women's movement; in the 1960s she became passive, partly for frustration; she argued that the Mahila Samiti, an adjunct of the political party, had no independent existence. Jyotsna became inactive as she had to look after a large family and bring up her children. Lakshmibala Doloi, who slapped a landlord's son who tried to disrupt a village meeting and became a local leader in the wake of the land struggle, was bitter as she, an agricultural labourer, did not get any land when land was distributed in her village. Giribala Seth, who participated in Salt satyagraha as well as Tebhaga movement, became gradually tired in the 1960s as she had to look after three sons and four daughters.<sup>13</sup> A new generation of activists had come to the force; they were drawn from the average-educated middle class and lived for the most part in towns. Some of these activists were school teachers and would be lucky to make ends meet. It seems that peasant women, sunk in poverty and illiteracy, accepted the average-educated women as their natural leaders.

Bagnan in Howrah district provided a unique example of the leadership of a middle class female activist, a brilliant organizer by any standard. Nirupama Chatterjee, whom we have

already met, set about organizing the MARS on her release from jail in 1951. Over the years the MARS and the Kisan Sabha moved hand in hand. Nirupama found time to work also among girl students. In August, 1959, she led a women's procession to Calcutta, on which the police opened fire. When the CPI split she joined the CPI(M) and was kept in jail during the India-China war. Elected to the State Assembly in 1967, Nirupama mobilized peasant women in the occupation of khas land in 1969; women in small batches accompanied the menfolk in the field during the harvesting season when clashes occurred between bargadars and landlords. It seems that land struggle hardly caught on in Howrah district, partly because bargadars were ranged against small landlords. By 1980, 2,257 acres of land were distributed among 11,161 bargadars and agricultural labourers, while 26,647 bargadars were recorded in Howrah district.

Nirupama, the undisputed leader of Ganatantrik Mahaila Samiti in Bagnan, trained women cadres coming from middle class as well as peasant families. They organized meetings and processions against dowry, price rise and evictions of bargadars; street corner meetings were held to draw women's attention to the danger of nuclear war. The membership of the Bagnan unit increased from 2,282 in 1978-79 to 3,439 in 1981-82.<sup>14</sup> A few Muslim women joined the women's movement; Mabukta Khatun, a young *bidi* worker, played an active part in bringing in Muslim women in adult education, tailoring and *bidi* making centres supported by the village Panchayat. Nirupama became a minister in the Left Front Government in 1982. In the meantime land struggle had become quiescent; the Mahila Ganatantrik Samiti showed a great deal of interest in the activities of the Panchayats.

At this point we will describe, cursorily and in passing, the development activities of the Panchayats on which the Left Front decided to rely, hoping that the Panchayats, elected by the people, could be an instrument for remedying some of the pressing grievances of the rural people. On June 4, 1978 about 25 million voters exercised their franchise to elect 56,000 Panchayat representatives; in the three-tier Panchayat bodies there were 3,242 Gram Panchayats, 324 Panchayat Samitis and

15 Zilla Parishads. The average turn out was 60 per cent ; women often turned out in greater numbers than men ; except in Darjeeling district, the CPI(M) captured about two-thirds of all Panchayat seats, which clearly indicated its growing strength in the countryside. The Panchayats were entrusted with a wide range of activities including irrigation, small industries, rural roads, adult education ; they were also associated with land distribution and Operation Barga. There was considerable emphasis on popular participation in formulating and implementing development programmes.<sup>15</sup> In the 1978 elections, only 200 women were elected to the Panchayats. But women could get comfort from the fact that two women would be appointed in the Panchayats if there was not a single elected woman member. The Mahila Ganatantrik Samiti claimed that rural women found employment in health centres as well as in the development work undertaken by the Panchayats ; peasant women received training in tailoring and leather work ; adult education centres were opened in many villages ; a few widows were given allowance in some villages.<sup>16</sup> While the women's organizations, dominated by the middle class, showed increasing interest in the activities of the Panchayats, the struggle for land receded imperceptibly in the background. There was a general feeling among the activists that the struggle for land could be kept in abeyance, since the Left Front was in power.

### Notes

1. B. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 1966, pp. 385, 459.
2. A Critique of the Political Resolution of the Central Committee, *Forum*, No. 2, October, 1955.
3. *Proceedings of the All India Kisan Sabha*, 1953.
4. *Report of the Ministry of Home Affairs*, 18 February, 1970.
5. Swasti Mitter, *Peasant Movements in West Bengal*, 1977, pp 52-59.
6. *Settlement Report*, 24-Parganas, 1973.
7. *The Statesman*, 10 October, 1969.
8. S. Mitter, op. cit., pp 72-73.
9. Interview with Chabi Mandal and Pranati Bhattacharya.

10. *Kakdwip Ganatantrik Mahila Samitir Barshik Sammalener report* (in Bengali), 1982-83.
11. D. Banerjee, *Land Reform*, 1980.
12. Interview with Geeta Mukherjee.
13. Interview with Bimala Maji, Jyotsna Bhowmick, Lakshimbala Doloi, Giribala Seth,
14. *Bagnan Ganatantrik Mahila Samitir Barshik Sammalener report* (in Bengali), 1981-82.
15. *Panchayats : A Review*, 1982.
16. *Election Manifesto*, Mahila Ganatantrik Samiti, 1983.



## CHAPTER 6

### *Naxalite Insurgency and Peasant Women*

The Communist Party withdrew the Telangana and Kakdwip struggles and chose to pursue the parliamentary path in the 1950s. In 1967 the Naxalites, splitting away from the communist movement, proclaimed their faith in Maoism and tried to build "red bases" in Indian villages. In the wake of the Sino-Soviet rift the Chinese Communist Party did not fail to give its blessing to the Naxalite insurgency. In May 1969, the Naxalites formed the CPI(ML) which adopted a programme in May, 1970. The Indian bourgeoisie was described as "comprador" that had "mortgaged the country to the imperialist powers, mainly to the U.S. imperialists and Soviet social-imperialists". In the agrarian section the main emphasis was on the contradiction between "feudalism and the broad masses of the Indian people". Hence the basic task was "to overthrow the rule of feudalism, comprador-bureaucratic capitalism, imperialism and social-imperialism". While the leading role of the working class in the revolution was accepted, there was much emphasis on securing the support of middle and rich peasants, urban petty-bourgeoisie as well as "revolutionary intellectuals". Following the Chinese model the Naxalites declared that the path of India's liberation was the path of "people's war", leading to the formation of "small bases of armed struggle". Curiously, it was emphatically asserted that the Indian revolution "is a part of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution", which was taking place when "the CPC headed by Chairman Mao and Vice-Chairman Lin Piao is leading the international proletariat to fulfil its historic mission of emancipating the whole of mankind".<sup>1</sup>

On the peasant movements in Naxalbari we shall draw on the account of Kanu Sanyal, one of the architects of the Naxalbari struggle. It was during the Tebhaga movement of 1946 that the bargadars were first drawn in the peasant movement; in 1948-50 there was "an interruption in the struggle" as the Communist Party pursued "the Ultra-leftist line". The Kisan Sabha regrouped its forces from 1951 onwards. In

1955-56 the bonus struggle of tea garden labourers and the peasant movement proceeded hand in hand. The Naxalbari Unit, following the directives of the West Bengal State Kisan Sabha, organized the struggle for the occupation of *benami* land in 1959, in which about two hundred peasants were arrested; this movement was called off in 1960. Apparently, the Kisan Sabha in Naxalbari carried on a long and patient campaign to woo peasant support. As Sanyal tells us: "..... these struggles could be organized because there was a leading team of self-sacrificing cadres".<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, some of the activists were veteran peasant leaders. Charu Majumdar, who became a full-time worker of the Communist Party in 1939, played a leading role in the Tebhaga movement in Jalpaiguri district, was in Jail in 1948-50, settled in Siliguri from 1952 onwards and contested a bye-election in 1963 but was defeated by the Congress candidate. Another full-time activist was Kanu Sanyal who was born in a middle class family in Jalpaiguri and organized the Kisan Sabha in Naxalbari. From Jalpaiguri came Sourin Bose, a graduate of Calcutta University, who worked as a full-time activist in Darjeeling district. Jangal Santhal, a tribal peasant, participated in numerous partial struggles, became the president of Naxalbari Kisan Sabha, and contested the Assembly elections in 1967 but was defeated. In the wake of the Naxalbari struggle the radical students, impetuous and romantic as always, turned to the CPI(ML); Kisan Chatterjee, Dilip Bagchi, Pabitra Pani Saha, promising students of North Bengal University, became important cadres who were suspended by the Vice-Chancellor and arrested by the police. The Naxalites increasingly relied on the army of student cadres, particularly in the "annihilation campaign of the class enemy" described by Charu Majumdar as "the higher form of class struggle".

It is noteworthy that the Naxalbari struggle, hailed by the Chinese Communist Party as "the spring thunder", remained confined to the three police stations of Phansidewa, Naxalbari and Kharibari, covering a small area of 274 square miles. The Rajbansi and tribal peasants, who constituted a large proportion of the rural population, were drawn in the peasant movement; they found support among tea garden labourers,

mostly, tribal, who were employed in 38 tea gardens in the Terai. In fact, the Naxalbari struggle was preceded by the bonus struggle launched by tea garden labourers in the autumn of 1966. It seems that the peasant movement received impetus from the tea garden labourers' movement. The tea garden labourers and the peasants often met in the *bazars*, exchanging views on their problems, and developed fraternal ties. Large meetings were held during the 1967 elections. Though Jangal Santhal was defeated in the elections, the Naxalbari leaders chose to unleash a militant struggle when the first United Front ministry was formed in March, 1967. Probably they felt that time was ripe for organizing militant struggles. In the summer of 1967, forcible cultivation of land and dehoarding of jotedar's paddy stocks were reported from the police stations of Phansidewa, Naxalbari and Kharibari. In May, Harekrishna Konar, the Land and Land Revenue Minister, met Kanu Sanyal in Siliguri; the Superintendent of Police proposed that the dehoarding campaign should be conducted by enlisting the cooperation of the police, that armed demonstrations should cease, and that the absconding activists would have to surrender to the police. The Naxalbari leaders, who had meanwhile left the CPI and joined the CPI(M), rejected these proposals and decided to continue the movement. On 24 May there was a clash between the police and peasants, in which Sonam Wangdi, an Inspector of Police, was killed, and four policemen were injured. Next day the police was on the rampage and raided the villages to arrest the activists who had gone into hiding. At Prasadujote peasant women had gathered to hold a meeting; they were suddenly attacked by a police party; nine peasants including seven women were killed in police firing. There was panic in the village and many families fled to Nepal. The Kisan Sabha held demonstrations condemning the firing on women. In June, Buraganj, a Naxalite stronghold, was declared a liberated area. On 10 June Nagen Ray Chaudhuri, a local jotedar, was killed.<sup>3</sup>

Describing the intensity of the movement, Sanyal writes that the membership of the Kisan Sabha leaped from 5,000 to 40,000; fifteen to twenty thousand peasants became full-time activists. Peasant committees were formed in the villages, which

embarked on seizure of land.<sup>4</sup> Sanyal's report may be exaggerated. But the fact remains that the struggle had at this stage considerable peasant support. Apparently the Naxalites tried to build a red base. It is not clear whether preparations for a protracted guerilla war were made during this period. Probably the leaders still hoped that the United Front ministry would not try to crush the movement. As later events showed, they failed to size up the situation.

The Naxalbari struggle created considerable tension within the United Front ministry in which the Bangla Congress was an important force. Within two days after the murder of Roy Chaudhuri a team of ministers arrived in Siliguri; they promised to implement land reform while appealing to the leaders to eschew violent activities. The appeal fell on deaf ears. There was a new wave of militant struggles. In Buraganj peasant demonstrations continued unabated; there was a clash with the police in which Tribeni Kanu and a policeman were killed. The formation of Land Reforms Committees, dominated by the Officials, hardly made any impact on the peasants. At this point, repression was let loose in the villages. Most of the leaders including Jangal Santhal were arrested and kept in jail; about 1,300 peasants were arrested; Kanu Sanyal, who managed to escape, was arrested in October, 1968. What was a memorable feature of the movement was the token strike observed by tea garden labourers on 17 August in protest against governmental repression.<sup>5</sup> Many activists found shelter in the tea gardens. By the autumn of 1967 the Naxalbari struggle tapered off.

There was a radical shift in the situation with the formation of the second United Front ministry in February, 1969. There was massive support of the peasantry behind this government. In this situation the CPI(M) mounted the movement for the seizure of *benami* land; the CPI-led Kisan Shaba organized forcible harvesting of paddy in *benami* lands. Curiously enough, the Naxalites, who had been released from jail, hardly cared to build a sustained movement of the rural poor. Retreating from continuous movement they resorted to individual murders. By August, 1970, forty-four leaders including Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal had been arrested. Even so,



individual murders continued unabated in 1971. There is an element of truth in Mukherjee's contention that the Naxalbari movement was no longer based on "peasant-worker solidarity", but on "urban-based youth"; the emergence of Charu Majumdar as the foremost leader "directly contributed to the introduction of the urban-elitist-authoritarian-petty bourgeois bias in the conduct and style of the movement".<sup>6</sup> In the meantime the warfare between the Naxalites and the CPI(M) had reached serious proportions. Das Gupta tells us that 528 members and supporters of CPI(M) were killed between March, 1970 and October, 1971.<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that hundreds of Naxalites were also killed. Few leaders could understand that these political murders, which had no parallel, created revulsion among all categories of the people. It is also a fact that some of the finest cadres were destroyed in this dreadful warfare. This was the price which had to be paid for introducing terroristic methods in political movements. The Marxists seemed to have forgotten that Plekhanov and Lenin passionately argued against the ideological position of the Narodniks.

The Chinese Communist Party, alas, sent an extremely critical letter to the CPI(ML). In their open letter some of the Naxalite leaders, who seemed to have become wise, criticized the tactical line put forward by Charu Majumdar. It was pointed out that armed struggle could not succeed "without mass struggle and mass organization"; the CPI(ML) had no agrarian programme. In his last letter Charu Majumdar pleaded for "a broadest united front against the Congress rule", while admitting that the armed struggle had "suffered a setback".<sup>8</sup> Majumdar could not elaborate his views on the tactical line. He was arrested on 16 July, 1972 and died in police custody on 28 July. The charismatic leader died when the Naxalbari struggle had disintegrated and the CPI(ML) became fragmented into various factions.

The Naxalite leaders, released from Jail in 1978, seemed to be in disarray. It is surprising that they hardly examined the new features in the agrarian social structure. Kanu Sanyal, reviewing the Naxalbari struggle, noted the obvious fact that some of the leaders "had fallen prey to adventurism by trying to apply mechanically the much valuable experience of other

countries". Sanyal did not lay down the strategy of the Indian revolution. Of the old leaders Asim Chatterjee alone categorically said that the "annihilation line" was "a gross distortion of the class struggle, a terrorism of very low kind", while pointing out that the line pursued in Jhargram in Midnapore district was rejected by the working class of Kharagpur.' Chatterjee, however, seemed to be chary in formulating the tactical line in the given situation. As the policy statements issued by the various Naxalite groups show, the main formulations of the old programme remained unchanged; they seemed to be sure that the country was in the throes of an agrarian revolution. There was, however, a new-found consciousness about the importance of organizing mass movements and building mass organizations. It is not clear why they were still divided among themselves.

All the evidence makes it clear that women were mobilized in the Naxalbari struggle. They attended village meetings in large numbers and generally remained in the van of the demonstrations. Very often entire families joined the movement. When the movement was at its peak, peasant women showed remarkable courage in the face of repression. They confronted the policemen when the male activists went into hiding; they kept contact with the activists, while doing household work and looking after the field. Some of the young activists were taught to use arms; they chased away the anti-socials who often came to the village in midnight to molest women. There grew up a nucleus of militants. After the murder of Wangdi, the male activists took shelter in the forests; the women activists tried to organize a meeting on 25 May. The police fired on the demonstration, killing seven women. Dhaneswari Singh, Sonamati Singh, Phulmati Singh, Surubala Burman who were killed in police firing came from the Rajbansi community. As in other North Bengal districts the Rajbansi women readily joined hands with the tribal women. In the wake of the militant movement the winds of change blew strongly in the villages, and peasant women, mostly illiterate, came to the forefront.

We will tell the story of some of the female activists. Suniti Biswakarmakar joined the movement with her entire family that

came from the tribal community ; the most prominent activist of the family was Babulal, her husband's brother, who became a martyr. There was no opposition from her old mother-in-law who sometimes attended village meetings. Though illiterate Suniti became a local leader, addressing meetings and mobilizing tribal women. Krishnamaya, a Nepali girl, who ran a wine shop, was drawn in the movement by Kanu Sanyal ; when her husband became a full-time activist, she sold the shop and joined the movement and gave shelter to absconding activists. Dhaneswari Singh, an agricultural labourer, was literate and easily became a leading cadre. Along with her husband she was drawn in the peasant movement in the 1950s. While her husband remained a sympathiser, Dhaneswari gradually became an activist who went to distant villages for campaigning among women. On 25 May, 1967 she was one of the leading activists who tried to organize a meeting at Prasudujote ; her son, who had meanwhile joined the movement, found her body beside a drain. Another martyr was Nayaneswari Mallik, who was born in a Dhamal community in 1944 and married a refugee school teacher from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Nayaneswari worked hard as a share cropper, collected wood from the forests, and hardly failed to attend meetings and demonstrations in which peasant women, armed with bows and arrows, choppers and spears, came in large numbers. Nayan grew to be a local leader. On 24 May Wangdi was killed ; the police raided the villages that evening ; the male activists went into hiding. Next day Nayan tried to mobilize women at Prasadujote. When the police party suddenly entered the village, the women surrounded it. Nayan was killed in police firing along with her child who was tied to her back. Samsari Saibani, a brave tribal girl, was one of the leading organizers of the women's demonstration at Prasadujote ; she faced the policemen and began to argue with them and died in police firing. From Hatighisa village, a stronghold of the Naxalites, came Galeswari Tharuni, a tribal woman who worked with Jangal Santhal and played a leading role in the movement. She became frustrated as the movement collapsed and joined the Congress.<sup>10</sup>

The storm had blown over, but things did not remain the

same. As Jangal Santhal told us, the rural poor could not be dispossessed of the *khas* land seized in 1967; most of the rapacious jotedars, mostly Bengali and Bihari Hindus, had fled the village. Forced labour had ended. The government had at last undertaken development work in this region. New roads were built connecting the forests with the centres of the expanding timber trade. Government Offices and shops sprang up. Memories of the Naxalbari struggle were fading. The old activists had become passive, while new activists, generally young and literate, were taking their place. They had set up Nari Mukti Samiti (Women's Liberation Front) that campaigned for rural credit, enhanced wages of day labourers and opening of adult education centres. The new Naxalities showed interest in the development work undertaken by the Panchayats; some of them contested the 1983 elections but were defeated by the CPI(M) candidates. Eschewing violent activities the new leaders of Nari Mukti Samiti were adapting to the new situation.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Jangal Santhal himself had become passive and was watching the situation.

Predictably, the CPI(M) dominated Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti had made considerable headway since the formation of the Left Front Government in 1977. The fortune-seekers jumped on to the CPI(M) bandwagon, while adopting a militant posture. The activists, young and average educated, came from the middle class. The Secretary of the Naxalbari Unit was Prabha Biswas, daughter of a Gandhite school teacher, who joined politics along with her brother in 1978. The Unit had 1,650 members; many disillusioned Naxalites had transferred their allegiance to the Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti, which carried on campaign for employment opportunities for women, adult education, rural credit. Few rural women were inducted into the leadership, partly because they were mostly illiterate. As in other districts, the Mahila Ganatantrik Samiti showed a great deal of interest in the Gram Panchayat that was considered to be an instrument of social change. In the 1983 elections three women candidates, for whom Prabha campaigned, were elected in Bagdogra Panchayat. The Mahila Ganatantrik Samiti held a series of meetings condemning dowry.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime the struggle for land, which was a prominent



feature of the Naxalbari struggle, had slipped into the back-ground.

### Notes

1. Samar Sen, et al., *Naxalbari and After*, vol. 2, 1978, pp. 277-78.
2. Kanu Sanyal, More About Naxalbari, Samar Sen, op. cit., pp. 329-33.
3. Partha Mukherjee, Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal, M. S. A. Rao, ed. *Social Movements in India*, vol. I, 1978, pp. 46-47.
4. Sanyal, Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region, Samar Sen, op. cit., pp. 208-9.
5. Partha Mukherjee, op. cit., also *The Statesman* 14 October, 1967.
6. Mukherjee, op. cit.
7. Biplab Das Gupta, *The Naxalite Movement*, 1974, Ch. 4.
8. Samar Sen, op. cit., pp. 320-22. In his last letter Charu Majumdar reiterated his faith in armed struggle: "Our conscious leadership will give birth to armed revolutionary upsurge....".
9. Asim Chatterjee, Hold High the Genuine Lessons of Naxalbari, 30 November, 1975, Samar Sen, op. cit., pp. 386-93.
10. Interview with Jangal Santhal, Panjab Rao, Khokan Majumdar.
11. Interview with Sabitri Karmakar, a full-time activist of Nari Mukti Samiti.
12. Interview with Prabha Biswas.



## CHAPTER 7

### *Labour Movement and Female Labourers in Plantations*

The tea plantations grew in India in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first garden in Cachar was opened in 1855 ; within two decades the tea industry spread in the Terai as well as in the Dooars. There was a severe crisis in 1866 which was the result of reckless extension of tea gardens, and many gardens were closed down by 1870. The industry quickly recovered and entered a period of almost uninterrupted prosperity from 1900 onwards. It is familiar that the British investors evinced a great deal of interest in developing the plantations ; the tea companies headed the list of sterling companies which were registered between 1874 and 1904 ; of the 63 sterling companies, 30 were tea companies. The capital sunk in the tea industry till 1902 was estimated at £ 25 million ; the number of gardens increased from 51 in 1859 to 302 in 1902 ; the area under tea cultivation was 520,000 acres.<sup>1</sup> The transport system was geared to the needs of tea industry that depended for its growth on the export market. By 1878 the railway link between Siliguri and the Ganges was completed ; the Assam Bengal Railway, formed in 1892, connected Assam with the port of Chittagong. It is noteworthy that 90 per cent of tea produced in India was exported to England.

Over the years the Bengalees showed considerable interest in tea industry. Several factors favoured the emergence of Bengalee enterprise in tea industry. The khasmahal lands, mainly waste lands, could be purchased at a nominal price. The opening of tea gardens did not entail large capital expenditure. There was no problem in the supply of labour ; the Santals and Oraons could be easily recruited in Chotonagpur. The urban middle classes, mostly lawyers, were lured by the prospect of making a fortune in tea gardens. While the Bengalee middle class purchased land and turned it over to barga cultivation, the middle class in Jalpaiguri turned to tea industry.

In the Dooars in Jalpaiguri district eleven tea companies were formed between 1879 and 1910. Joy Chandra Sanyal, a lawyer, was the promoter-director of Jalpaiguri Tea Company. His brother, Jyotish Sanyal, also a lawyer, promoted two companies and played a leading role in the formation of the Indian Tea Planters Association in 1915. Jadav Chakravarty, a lawyer, acquired considerable landed property and became associated with all the tea companies till 1910. Gopal Ghosh, a clerk in the Government Office, showed remarkable enterprise in promoting six companies; his sons were prominent tea magnates. Tarini Prasad Ray, a lawyer and son-in-law of Gopal Ghosh, promoted Anjuman Tea Company in 1889 and became the managing director of sixteen companies. Prasanna Deb Raikat, a big landlord, was the promoter-director of several tea companies.<sup>2</sup> Between the two wars there was considerable investment of Indian capital in tea gardens, and the tea magnates included Asoke Ray, B. P. Singh Roy, S. K. Dutt, A. N. Chaudhury, A. K. Mukherjee. The Bengalees remained active in tea industry after the coming of independence. Even so, British capital remained in a dominant position until the 1960s; from 1960 onwards the British planters started selling the gardens to the Indian capitalists, mostly Marwaris. But the industry hardly became an efficient industry after the transfer of control from the British planters to the Indian capitalists.

Labour in the Dooars was recruited mostly from Chotonagpur and Santal Parganas; tribal peasants from Orissa, Madras and Central Provinces were also recruited in the 1930s. As Griffiths notes, the Assam system of labour recruitment was not followed, since "the Dooars was much nearer than Assam to its principal recruiting grounds". Generally speaking, the garden *sardars* were appointed to recruit labour; the *sardar's* commission was three rupees per worker. The Indian-owned gardens often relied on local agents for the supply of labour; the *babu* (clerk) selected these agents who recruited labour for the gardens. The majority of the workers, known as *Madasias*, came from Chotonagpur and Santal Parganas, while the *paharis* (hillmen) formed 15 per cent of the total labour force. The majority of the workers fell under the category of resident labour. As the Rege Committee reported, absenteeism

was high both among men and women, but more among women; it was high (40 per cent) in August and tended to be low in November (33 per cent). The workers complained of tiring and arduous labour as well as sickness, due chiefly to malaria; they had also to attend to cultivation on their garden land. In the Dooars gardens, 87.8 per cent of the workers had small plots of land, while in Darjeeling gardens 97 per cent families held land. One can understand why the proportion of resident labour was high in the plantations; the workers remained tied to the tiny plots of land which were often rent-free. The workers lived in rows of thatched huts; the Rege Committee referred to the absence of plinths, inadequate floor space and congestion; for water supply they relied on wells which were mostly *Cutch*. *Hazira* was paid monthly in a few gardens; the whole amount was paid weekly in some gardens; it was 4 annas for men, 3 annas for women and 2 annas for children. The pluckers worked from morning till 5 P.M., with midday break of about an hour. During heavy flush, the field workers were asked to work on Sundays, for which the gardens paid them at double rates.<sup>3</sup>

In another section we have noted that female labourers constituted about 50 per cent of the labour force in the tea gardens. Partly this could be explained by the special aptitude of women for main operations like plucking and weeding. Furthermore, technological change hardly occurred in the production process even in the 1970s; most of the work was agricultural in nature. The female labourers employed in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts constituted nearly 23 per cent of the women employed in all the plantations (e.g. tea, coffee, rubber, cinchona) in India; the average daily employment of women per plantation was 378 in the Dooars and Darjeeling gardens in 1975, whereas it was 363 in the Assam plantations. More than 80 per cent of the women were concentrated in tea plucking while only 7 per cent of the women were engaged in weeding and manuring. The female labourers were considered to be more efficient than men in tea plucking and manuring; for jobs like spraying, clearing forests, pruning and digging pits men were generally employed. Despite illiteracy and social backwardness, unionisation of female labourers



made substantial progress ; more than 70 per cent of the female workers were members of one or the other union as against a slightly higher percentage for male workers.<sup>4</sup>

The female workers began their day at 5 A.M., prepared the morning meal that consisted of *Chapaties* and black tea, and rushed to the garden where they worked till 5 P.M., with a break of an hour for midday meals. In most gardens there were no creches ; women brought their children in the gardens, which generally provided free feeding of children. Returning home they found little time for rest. There was the food to cook, the rice-beer to brew, the children to nurse. Absenteeism was high among women ; those women who were very ill received sickness benefit. The Rege Committee reported that 70 per cent of the labourers came from 15-55 age-group ; only 4.3 per cent of the labourers were above 55 years. Apparently, the female labourers became too weak after 55 to work in the gardens. It was not until 1952 that statutory minimum wages were fixed for the labourers in the plantations in West Bengal. The daily wage-rate for male workers increased from Rs. 1.19 paise to Rs. 3 between 1952 and 1973, while female labourers got Rs. 1.06 and Rs. 2.83. The wage differentials helped to perpetuate the unequal status of women. It is noteworthy that women were in the category of daily-rated workers ; few women were taken on the supervisory staff. The skilled labourers were invariably drawn from male labourers.

By and large the tribal women had a wide freedom. They went to the *hat*, smoked and drank with men. Widow re-marriage and divorce were allowed. Consensual unions were common. In arranged marriages the average age at marriage for girls was sixteen years ; the father of the girl got bride price from the boy's family. Previously there was a taboo on inter-tribal marriage, but in the recent period such marriages in the Dooars seemed to be on the increase. Marriages generally took place within the garden, since a girl employed in one garden would find it difficult to get a job in the garden where her husband worked. The Oraon women wore saris and blouses, while the Nepali women (*paharias*) liked colourful dress. The Nepali women took a great deal of interest in the education of their children. They often set up shops to sell

vegetables. The official reports repeatedly refer to the social backwardness of the Oraon women who remained sunk in illiteracy.

Griffiths laments that the good old days of the colonial period ended after the transfer of power thanks to state intervention. In the colonial period the planters had enjoyed "a fair measure of freedom"; from 1947 onwards the state had "powerful instruments" in the Industrial Disputes Act and the Minimum Wages Act. The British planters found it difficult to adapt to the new situation. Under the Industrial Disputes Act, the Government could refer any industrial dispute to a Tribunal whose decision would be binding on the employers as well as the workers. The Tribunals were empowered to take decisions with regard to payment of bonus to the workers as well as retrenchment. Under the Minimum Wages Act, the Governments were asked to fix a minimum rate of wages for the workers before 31 March, 1952; state Governments were empowered to fix the number of hours of work for labour. The Government could also intervene in industrial relations by means of tripartite conferences; the Industrial Committee on Plantations was set up to advise the Central Government on labour relations. Griffiths, while criticising the pro-labour attitude of the Government, writes that the employees wanted to avoid settlement at tripartite conferences and refer the disputed issues to tribunals. Since there were a number of unions of different political parties in the Dooars and Darjeeling, bipartite discussions rather than tripartite negotiations were more usual.<sup>5</sup>

We turn now to the story of the labour movement. Although the tea gardens were formed in the second half of the nineteenth century, labour movement began to grow during the last days of British rule. In Darjeeling the situation began to change in 1946. The Darjeeling Tea Garden Workers Union, formed in 1945, came under the control of the Communists who tried to utilise the "inequality in treatment" of labour. As Ratanlal Brahman, the communist candidate, was elected to the Assembly, strike notices were served on seventeen gardens. The Gurkha League, on which the British planters relied, was "badly led" and could not play an effective role. Troubles developed on

the Moondakotee Tea Estate where disciplinary action was taken against some workers. In April, 1947 the garden authorities declared a lock out, and a few activists were dismissed. The lock out continued until January, 1948 when the Industrial Tribunal vindicated the action of the Company. In March, 1948 the Communist Party was banned in West Bengal. Even so, agitations did not cease in the Darjeeling gardens. In 1950 the Moondakotee gardens were again affected; the police arrested some ring-leaders. In the meantime unrest spread to other gardens thanks to the alleged activities of the Communist Party. In the Margaret Hope tea estate, the trouble was acute. As the Chief Labour Adviser noted: "... By day all appeared to be quiet, but at night workers were forced to join the Communist Party and to pay subscriptions." On 27 March, 1950 a garden employee was assaulted. When the ring-leader of the agitation was arrested, the situation turned to normal. But the Communists continued to hold meetings in the local *bazars*, and intimidation of the staff continued.<sup>6</sup> In June, 1955 the workers of Margaret Hope tea garden struck work; there was police firing on a labour demonstration, in which five workers including two Nepali girls, Maula Soba Raini (22 years) and Amrita Kumari Sani (18 years), were killed. The female workers were in the van of this demonstration.<sup>7</sup>

In the Dooars the Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union was formed in 1946, which was later affiliated to the AITUC. It seems that the railway workers, who had already formed their union, played an important role in organizing the labourers in the Dooars gardens. The report of the Indian Tea Planters Association vividly described how the labourers, stirred by the Tebhaga movement, moved in the countryside in support of the peasants in early 1947: "... bands of labourers had left their work and headed by Communist leaders, were roaming the countryside, in many cases armed with lathis and spears, with the object of entering *bustees* and raiding paddy stocks in support of a general demand by the ryots of the district for a two-thirds share of the paddy crop ... In most cases where demands were put forward by the labour to the tea garden managers, these included demands for increased ration of food and cloth and were not infrequently accompanied by

a demand for dismissal of one or more members of the garden clerical staff, with the result that on some gardens the Indian staff had been forced to leave.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, there was great enthusiasm among the labourers who attended meetings and demonstrations in large numbers. The railway workers Union regularly distributed printed leaflets among them; they organized a public meeting at Dumohani in which thousands of labourers came from the tea gardens and raised slogans like “*Jotedari Ko Khatam Karo*” (destroy Jotedari system), “*Bileti Malik London Bhago*” (British owners go back to London).<sup>9</sup> It seems that the Tebhaga movement and the labour movement went hand in hand, which revealed the strength of ethnic solidarity. Over the years the solidarity between the Oraon peasants and the Oraon labourers became a feature of the political movement in the Dooars. As we have already noted in another section, this solidarity was a marked feature of the Naxalbari struggle in its early phase; the support of the labourers on the Terai gardens stood it in good stead.

From 1951 onwards the labourers on the Dooars gardens organized a series of partial struggles. There were 281 strikes in 1953; as Griffiths writes, the workers were “in an ugly mood”. The central demand was wage increase which was sought to be justified on the ground that the gardens made a large profit thanks to the Korean boom. The planters thought that the only way to make profits was to pay the lowest wages to labour. The Tea Planters Association issued an alarmist report pointing to attacks on the police that suffered injuries from “the arrows and stones of the rioters”.<sup>10</sup> In June, 1955 the labourers in a Dooars garden went on a strike, demanding the reinstatement of five retrenched female labourers. Indeed, it was an unprecedented strike that revealed the pressure exerted by the female labourers who had been mobilized in the gardens. Gradually the labourers put forward the demand that all the retrenched men and women should be reinstated. In August, 1955 the labourers in the Dooars as well as in the Terai went on a strike in the peak flushing season, demanding bonus out of profits. There was considerable popular support behind this strike movement. The Planters Association noted “the sorry series of assaults upon management and clerical



staff". There was a complete strike on thirty-one gardens, a partial strike on thirty, while there was no strike on the remaining forty gardens. Griffiths tells us that the employers, who had the support of the West Bengal Government, remained firm and the strike was called off in less than three weeks. But the Central Government seemed to be determined that "labour should share liberally in the 1954 profits"; the planters had no choice but to agree to pay bonus to the labourers. Furthermore the bonus was in excess of what the unions had demanded. For the first time in the history of tea industry the workers received a bonus. Many gardens paid it by instalments and the payment of the 1956 bonus could not be completed until 30 September, 1958.<sup>11</sup>

Though the bonus struggle ended in a victory, the leadership did not fail to notice how difficult it was for the poor labourers to continue an indefinite strike. From 1957 onwards the number of strikes decreased; a threatened strike was averted in 1960. Griffiths writes that the tea industry "emerged happily from a period of unrest". But the situation, alas, took a radical turn in 1969 when the workers launched another general strike that had no parallel. In the meantime the multiplicity of unions had divided the workers. Apart from the AITUC that pioneered the labour movement in the plantations, there were several unions set up by the political parties, e.g. Indian National Trade Union Congress (Congress), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (Socialist Party), United Trade Union Congress (Revolutionary Socialist Party). Following the split in the CPI, the CPI(M) formed the CITU. It was not until 1971 that the CITU formed a separate union in the plantations. What is noteworthy is that some of the unions set up the Coordination Committee in 1962 so that a united movement could be organized. With the formation of the second United Front Government in 1969, the Coordination Committee, responding to the mood of the workers, framed a charters of demands including increase of employment in the gardens and revision of wages. As the employers refused to concede the demands, all the major trade unions, e.g. AITUC, INTUC, UTUC and HMS gave the call of a general strike that began on 18 August, 1969. Never before had such a strike movement, reflecting intense

social unrest, occurred in the plantations. Most of the gardens in Darjeeling, Terai and the Dooars were drawn in the strike. Apart from the workers, the *babus*, representing the clerical staff, joined the strike. Thousands of labourers attended meetings and processions in the gardens; female labourers waving banners were in the van of the processions; even the *babus*, with red flags in their hands, moved in the processions. There were *hartals* in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling towns in support of the general strike.<sup>12</sup> The Planters Association reported that the workers resorted to *gherao* and forcible occupation of gardens, while the police remained neutral.<sup>13</sup> The general strike continued for eighteen days. On 2 September, the employers, "under compelling circumstances", conceded some of the major demands of the workers. It was agreed that vacancies in the tea gardens would be filled, that the gardens would recruit new workers in certain proportions, that wages would be revised after a machinery was set up, that resident temporary workers would receive subsidised ration, that permanent vacancies in clerical, medical and technical staff would be filled.<sup>14</sup>

On the morrow of the agreement, the planters complained of "workers' complete disregard of managerial authority". It was no longer possible for the employers to ignore the workers demands for higher wages. The Second Wage Fixation Committee announced in the winter of 1975 that the workers should receive an interim increase of one rupee and fifteen paise in two instalments. The final recommendations of the Wage Committee were released in July, 1977; the daily wages of the labourers were fixed at Rs. 6.50 for male as well as female labourers. After the formation of the Left Front Government, the intervention of the state played a major role in housing, health and social security. This was particularly evident in the standards of living of female labourers. They received Rs. 9 as daily wages, a bonus on profits, medical leave as well as maternity benefit; they were entitled to provident fund and pension; they also got subsidised ration. It would be fatuous to think that the labourers had become affluent. There was resentment against price rise, inadequate ration, growing unemployment. In fact, many gardens had become sick, and hundreds of workers lost their jobs. There was no provisions for creches in the

gardens. But it seems that strikes tended to diminish substantially in the recent period; there was considerable emphasis on negotiations which had become an integral part of the trade union movement.

At this point we will briefly indicate the structure of the trade unions as well as the position of female labourers. The garden committee was the primary unit of the trade union; the garden leaders generally came from the monthly-rated workers who enjoyed a superior status; the functionaries were rarely chosen from the daily-rated workers. The leadership of the unions was drawn mostly from the middle class Bengalees who could carry on negotiations with the employers and represent the workers in tribunals and tripartite conferences; senior leaders were the chief spokesmen of labour in the tripartite conferences. Although the employers were extremely critical of the role of "outside leadership", the unions had to rely on experienced leaders who had led the strike movements and earned their confidence. There was lack of trained cadres who could replace the old experienced leaders. What is worth noting is that female labourers were rarely chosen as functionaries of the garden unit.<sup>15</sup> Since the female labourers were mostly illiterate, they were not promoted to the leading posts. Broadly speaking they accepted the leadership of the male labourers with whom they worked in the same garden facing common problems. In a male-dominated society the female labourers accepted their status, while participating in the movements and joining the trade unions. Probably it was a pragmatic view in the given situation. Few female labourers could hope to be full-time activists, because they had to remain engaged in domestic work. It is, however, not clear whether the male-dominated unions paid any attention to the specific problems of the female labourers.<sup>16</sup> What is baffling is that the journals, published by the left-oriented women's organizations, hardly focussed on the problems faced by the labouring women in the plantations. Few middle class women went to the gardens to train the cadres.

The female labourers, constituting a large proportion of the labour force, could not be ignored; they were mobilized in all the movements. From 1955 onwards unionization of female

labourers increased considerably. Some of them played a leading role in the movements and emerged as local leaders. Maili Chetri, who worked in Dengaujhar garden, was drawn in the labour movement in 1946. As an activist of the union Maili moved in the garden, mobilizing men and women labourers; she organized a demonstration that came to Darjeeling town. When the CPI was banned in 1948, Maili, who was pregnant, went underground, lived mostly in the forests and died at an early age.<sup>17</sup> One of the most respected leaders in the Dooars gardens was Jamuna Oraoni, daughter of a tea garden labourer, who was greeted even by the *babus* as "Sister-Jamuna". When she was a girl, Jamuna was deeply impressed by the Tebhaga movement and seldom failed to attend peasants' demonstrations. Though illiterate she learnt to address public meetings held in distant gardens. Her husband was not so generous that he would live with an "absentee wife" who often left home and went to other gardens. Deserted by her husband and childless, Jamuna remained sunk in the labour movement, joined the Communist Party and rose to be a leader of the AITUC Union. Niaro Orain, a childless widow, was recruited by Jamuna and became an important cadre who moved in different gardens to mobilize women. There was Amrita Thapa, a Nepali labourer, who did not get cold feet when her husband was killed by the employers and mobilized 350 female members in her garden union that had 600 members. Victoria Kharia, a Christian labourer, was first drawn in the labour movement when the bonus struggle was launched in 1955; she became an activist and took part in the 1969 general strike. Kalabati Pradhan, who was 27 years old, represented the generation of activists who joined the CITU-led labour movement in the 1970s, attended meetings and demonstrations, "gheraoed" the manager within her garden, but hardly found time to mobilize women in other gardens.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of working class standard to a modest human level could be related to the labour movement that made considerable advance since the 1955 bonus struggle. What was a striking feature was the influx of young women in the unions in the 1970s, while some of the old militants had become passive; very often these young workers showed a tendency to



lead a soft life. Since the Left Front was in power, militant movements had diminished ; the young girls, though active in the garden union, seldom took part in gheraos and strikes which were frequent years ago. The multiplicity of unions created new problems ; female labourers had become divided among themselves. In the meantime, discontent was growing among them due largely to continuing price rise and acute unemployment. Unlike the *babus*, they had little savings to fall back upon. Looking back one may say that the trade union, backed by radical strike movements, made a deep impression on the female labourers who readily joined the union and continued to take part in meetings and demonstrations designed to improve their standards of living.

### Notes

1. Memorial of the Secretary, Indian Tea Association, March 10, 1902, cited in S. K. Sen, *Economic Policy and Development of India, 1848-1926*, p. 52 ; also S. Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry*, 1954.
2. S. Mukherjee, Emergence of Bengalee Entrepreneurship in Tea Plantation, 1879-1933, *Economic and Social History Review*, October—December, 1976.
3. D. V. Rege, *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations*, 1950, pp. 74, 82, 89-91.
4. *Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Workers in Plantations*, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1980. The report noted that female workers were generally illiterate and socially backward.
5. Griffiths, op. cit., pp. 320-26.
6. Ibid, pp. 289-91.
7. *Swadhinata*, 2 July, 1955. The Workers in 11 tea gardens in the Terai observed hartal on 3 July protesting against the police firing in Darjeeling.
8. Report of Indian Tea Association, quoted in Griffiths, op. cit., p. 387.
9. Bhowmik, op. cit., p. 146.
10. Griffiths, op. cit., p. 388.
11. Ibid, pp. 342, 389.
12. *Kalantar*, 18 August, 1969, 29 August, 1969 ; *Deshhitaishi*, 22 August, 1969. The Gorkha League also extended its support to the strike. It was noted that the number of labourers decreased from 268,000 to 188,000 between 1956 and 1966.

13. *Report of Indian Tea Planters Association, Jalpaiguri, April 22, 1969.*
14. Ibid, 5 September, 1969. The labourers were represented by veteran leaders, e.g. Manoranjan Roy (AITUC), Kali Mukherjee (INTUC), Jatin Chakravarty (UTUC), Parimal Mitra and Debprasad Ghosh (Cha Bagan Workers Union).
15. Bhowmik, op. cit., pp. 160, 162, 166.
16. Interview with Bimal Das Gupta (AITUC).
17. R. Chakravartty, op. cit., pp. 117-18.
18. This section is based on our fieldwork in the Dooars gardens.

## CHAPTER 8

### *New Issues*

After the coming of independence some major changes in law were brought about, which partly reflected the impact of radical public opinion. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 permits divorce by mutual consent; biogamy is a punishable offence. Under the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 women have acquired the right to inherit property. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 permits any female Hindu to take a son or daughter in adoption, subject to the provision that a Hindu wife shall be maintained by her husband during her lifetime; a wife shall be entitled to live separately from her husband without forfeiting her claim for maintenance. Though the legal status of women improved thanks to progressive legislation, the women were faced with the stubborn opposition of the most conservative and obscurantist forces that attacked the secularisation of society. Furthermore, there was the lack of awareness of millions of women of their legal rights which surely laid the basis of improving their status. The dowry killings and atrocities on Harijan women, which received wide publicity in the press, revealed the bizarre situation in this country. In the recent period women's organizations raised the demand for the appointment of female judges to deal with cases of atrocities on women, arguing that this could ensure justice for women in a male-dominated society.<sup>1</sup>

When we turn to the country as a whole, the low level of literacy of rural women seems to be largely responsible for their ignorance of tenancy legislation, legal provisions of divorce, right of inheritance, right of equal wage for equal work. It may be noted that the rural female literacy rate in West Bengal was 14.63 in 1971, when it was 52.63 in Kerala, 17.47 in Maharashtra, 17.07 in Gujarat; the literacy rate was much lower in U.P. (6.59), Bihar (6.16), Madhya Pradesh (6.00), Rajasthan (3.85). As recent research shows, the problem of illiteracy in India was largely a problem of illiteracy among rural women coming from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes; out of 34.2 million women of scheduled castes only

1.7 million were literate, whereas 0.7 million out of 18.2 million women of scheduled tribes were literate. Literacy made some progress among scheduled caste women between 1961 and 1971, but tribal women remained sunk in illiteracy.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the mean age at marriage of girls had not been substantially raised in those states where literacy rate of women remained low. During 1951-61 the mean age of marriage was below 15 in U.P., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, while it was between 15 and 17 in Bengal, Maharashtra and Mysore. Between 1961 and 1971 the increase of marriage age of females was small in magnitude; it was 15.6 in U.P., 15.5 in Bihar, 15.4 in Rajasthan, 15.2 in Madhya Pradesh, while it was 17.8 in West Bengal, 19.9 in Tamil Nadu, 20.9 in Kerala, 18.8 in Punjab.<sup>3</sup> It is familiar that high literacy rates and high marriage age are related with lower fertility and higher female work participation.

In another section we have noted that land reform has laid the basis of small peasant agriculture in West Bengal; even the barga system has not withered away. Few writers have cared to examine the impact of small peasant agriculture on the social consciousness of peasant women. Lenin made some perceptive comments on it in his talks with Clara Zetkin. He bitterly commented on "the calm acquiescence of men who see how women grow worn out in petty, monstrous household work, their strength and time dissipated and wasted, their minds growing narrow and stale, their hearts beating slowly, their wills weakened." Lenin argued that small peasant economy could hardly raise women's social status: "small peasant economy means small separate households, with the women chained to them." He called upon women to take the lead in forming collective farms which would make them free and equal citizens.<sup>4</sup>

The ideas of cooperative large-scale agriculture grew in this country in the wake of nationalist as well as agrarian movements. In the memorandum to the Land Revenue Commission, the Bengal Kisan Sabha, while advocating peasant ownership of land, noted that "reclaimed land should be state-owned and worked by agricultural labourers".<sup>5</sup> On the morrow of independence the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee



recommended that "individual peasant farming" would have to be assisted by "a cooperative organization"; when waste lands were reclaimed and allotted to agricultural labourers, "state farming of some limited degree may be necessary".<sup>6</sup> In the first plan (1951-55) and the second plan (1956-60), co-operativisation of agriculture was envisaged. But this programme was not implemented. In fact, it was abandoned, while co-operatives in the field of credit and marketing received considerable attention. These cooperatives, dominated by affluent peasants, promoted the development of capitalist agriculture as time passed. As we have already noted, the process of the expropriation of the small peasants and the growth of the agricultural labourers who hired themselves out for money went hand in hand. Though the small farm was immensely vulnerable, the programme of building cooperative agriculture hardly received any attention. There is little evidence to show that experiments were made in West Bengal to form cooperatives on reclaimed land, while the number of non-workers among female agricultural labourers had been steadily increasing. What needs to be asked is whether the small farm can at all be viable when the rich peasants, resourceful as always, dominate rural economy. Curiously enough, the women's organizations, while emphasizing the importance of land reform, have not even broached the proposal of organizing female agricultural labourers into cooperative farms that could improve their living conditions as well as broaden their social outlook. Without idealizing the reality the social backwardness of rural women has to be recognized.

The Left Front Government distributed land among the rural poor; more than one million bargadars had been recorded. But the fact is that the cravings of the rural poor could not be satisfied in view of the rapid rise in the number of agricultural labourers. What was a new trend was that small peasants often leased out their land to the affluent peasants. Since the struggle for land that reached its climax in 1969 waned after the formation of the Left Front Government in 1977, the women's organizations turned to the Panchayats which were invariably male-dominated. The Status of Women Committee recommended the establishment of "statutory women's

Panchayats at the village level" which would be responsible for implementing the development programmes for women and children. These women's Panchayats would be directly elected by the women and have the right to send representatives to the Panchayat Samitis as well as Zila Parishads. It is not clear why political parties as well as the women's organizations could not accept this recommendation. So far the Left Front Government had not set up even Women's Committees at the village level which would be entrusted with the formulation and implementation of development programmes. Since only a few women have been elected to the Panchayats, the importance of broad based women's committees needs to be emphasized.

It is not likely that the Panchayats, mostly dominated by the upper-caste rural elite, would give their blessings to any radical programme designed to change the social conditions of scheduled caste and tribal women ; the social barriers between the upper castes and the Harijans had not been broken despite the spread of democratic movements. It is true that agrarian movements improved the status of scheduled caste and tribal women ; even so they would find it difficult to articulate their grievances. The danger is that the Panchayats would develop as male bastions ; rural women would not be involved in the development programme undertaken by them. What may be necessary is a reorientation of the development strategies ; sewing and tailoring centres, for instance, are not very useful for female agricultural labourers. Hence the need for Women's Panchayats. It would be illusory to think that women can have exactly the same place as men in the three-tier Panchayats in our hierarchic society.

In the 1983 elections the Left parties secured the majority, while the Congress won 14,733 seats out of 45,670 seats in the Gram Panchayats. Generally speaking, the members were drawn from school teachers, middle and rich peasants ; some of the members were the cadres of the left parties. Apparently, the petty bourgeois elements came to the forefront. In the election manifesto the Left Front announced that the Left parties, relying on the rural poor, would continue the programme of land distribution and Operation Barga ; they felt

that implementation of these programmes would fan the flame of class struggle in the countryside.<sup>7</sup> It does not seem that class struggle flared up in the villages; the post election clashes in which workers of the political parties were killed partly indicated the discontent against the vested interests that had grown in the Panchayats. It is not clear whether the Left parties would be able to hold in check the petty bourgeois elements who were rooted to the village. Probably the realities of the situation would force the Left parties to organize popular movements in order to make the Panchayats more effective instruments for social change. The women's organizations could unleash such movements while demanding that women should have exactly the same place as men in the Panchayats.

In another section we have noted the displacement of female workers from the industries, notably cotton textiles industry, jute industry, coal mines; even in the tea plantations the problem of unemployment had become acute. In agriculture the new technology led to the displacement of female cultivators and created greater employment opportunity for male labourers. It was not fortuitous that the NFIW (National Federation of Indian Women) drew pointed attention to the predicament of women in the given situation and raised the demand for 25 per cent reservation of jobs for women in government, semi-government and local self-government institutions. There was some improvement in women's employment during 1971-1981, but this took place mainly in the organized sector, while the majority of women found employment in the unorganized sector. The NFIW noted that women were paid less than men in unskilled jobs and warned that "if this state of affairs is tolerated by the men and by the trade union movement, increasingly the tendency will be for the employers only to engage women for such work". While pledging to campaign for more job opportunities for women, wider access to vocational training and reservation of jobs for women, the NFIW rightly noted the importance of linking up the women's movement with the trade union movement: "The NFIW needs to develop closer and more systematic and regular links with the trade union movement in the coming period .... Such links

can help the trade unions to reach the vast masses of working women employed in unorganized sector . . . a major direction of the movement has to be a mass propaganda drive through all possible means to assert that the right to work is a basic human right, essential for women as much as for men".<sup>8</sup>

It is surprising that the major women's organizations remained divided among themselves and hardly sought to initiate movements on common issues. Since the country made substantial progress in creating progressive legislation, an opportunity was created to develop united movements. What was needed was a new perspective corresponding to the realities of the present situation. The women's organizations should continue to influence the political parties as well as the government, and should acquire, as Collien puts it, "permanent political skill and influence" to protect their rights won after years of struggle.<sup>9</sup>

On the perspective of women's movement Mr. Namboodiripad, a distinguished leader of the communist movement, categorically states that the overriding consideration would be the strengthening of "the common organization of the working people", because women were exposed to "the oppression and exploitation to which all the working people have been and continue to be subjected"; women were urged to fight against pre-capitalist society with its caste, communal and tribal institutions as well as against "the growing capitalist society"; he advocates a struggle against "feminism" as well as "male chauvinism".<sup>10</sup> Curiously enough, Namboodiripad hardly refers to the fact that women had become wary in continuing union activity. One may say that the unions had become male bastions. As Arlene Kaplan Daniels tells us, a major hindrance to the mobilization of female labourers "lies in the extreme hostility of men" which was evident not only in reformist organizations but also in "left-controlled mass organizations". Indeed, the female labourers were faced with intractable problems; to draw them in union activity, as a female activist feelingly points out, "requires extreme patience".<sup>11</sup>

Some writers, however, take an extreme position and emphatically state that women should have separate unions to press women's demands. Their arguments may be briefly noted.



Fewer women are members of trade unions ; fewer women are in the positions of leadership. The working women are concerned with unbearable problems at the workplace as well as at home. Broadly speaking, unions have failed to represent women's interests adequately.<sup>12</sup> What is clearly missing in their arguments is that female labourers working for years with male labourers in the same industry have become an integral part of the trade union movement. As we have tried to show, female labourers in the tea gardens were drawn in all the major movements ; along with the menfolk they participated in meetings, processions and *gheraos* ; some of the female activists emerged as local leaders. It would be fatuous to idealize the reality. There are only a few effective cadres who could mobilize women working in the scattered gardens. Political consciousness of the female labourers has remained rudimentary. Since industrial relations have become complex, trade union movement, to be effective, requires a mature leadership. But the female labourers could form cells or committees in each garden to formulate their specific demands e.g. maternity benefits, creches, subsidies for women's cooperatives, measures against sexual harassment ; these committees could force the male-dominated unions to include such demands in the common charter of demands when movements are unleashed. Only a protracted movement in which male as well as female labourers would be involved could make the necessary attack on the capitalist system.

### Notes

1. *The Statesman*, 24 August, 1983.
2. A. Mitra, *India's Population*, vol. I, 1978, pp. 407-8.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 306-7.
4. C. Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*, 1971, p. 159.
5. Memorandum of BPKS, 1939, for full text see *Report of Land Revenue Commission*, Bengal, 1940, vol. 6.
6. *Report of Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, 1949, pp. 16-17, 25. R. Reddiar and N. G. Ranga, in their minute of dissent, objected to "making the actual cultivation of land a cooperative process through compulsion". The vested interests consistently opposed the formation of cooperatives.

7. *Election Manifesto*, 1983.

8. *Education, Training and Employment of Women*, National Federation of Indian Women, Guntur, 1984. As the following table shows, the leadership of NFIW is left-oriented.

*Structure of NFIW*

Year	President	Secretaries	Delegates attending
1954	Pushpamayee Bose	Anasuya Gyan Chand	60
1957	Anasuya Gyan Chand	Hazra Begum	
		Hazra Begum	300
1959	Anasuya Gyan Chand	D. Chari	
		Hazra Begum	120
1962	Kapila Kandwala	Vimala Farooqui	
1965	Kapila Kandwala	Renu Chakravorty	220
1967	Aruna Asaf Ali	Renu Chakravorty	177
1970	Aruna Asaf Ali	Renu Chakravorty	228
1973	Aruna Asaf Ali	Vimala Farooqui	1021
		Vimala Farooqui	1400

9. V. Helen Collien, *Counselling Women*, Macmillan, London, 1982.
10. E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Selected Writings*, vol. I, 1982, p. 254.
11. V. Ranadive, Workingclass Women, *Social Scientist*, vol. 4, Nov.-Dec., 1975.
12. S. Gothoskar, R. Banerjee, N. Chaturvedi, Women, Work, Organization and Struggle, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 March, 1983.

## *Significance of Women's Movement*

The women's movement that grew as part of the struggle of all categories of the Indian people for independence became increasingly linked with agrarian movements, and was radicalised under the impact of these movements. Indeed the Tebhaga movement marked a turning-point in the history of the women's movement in Bengal. Tens of thousands of peasant women who lived in scattered villages were roused to political life and social movement. The women's movement, though dominated by the urban middle class, did not fail to champion the cause of the poor and the downtrodden and sought to improve their status in our hierarchic society. This is what is likely to be its lasting effect.

Few writers have turned the focus of their enquiry on the female labourers employed in the tea gardens. The most striking changes occurred in the tea gardens, where the female labourers, organized in trade unions, were drawn in a series of partial struggles as well as strike movements. These movements substantially improved the living conditions of the female labourers. All the evidence makes it clear that unionization had considerably spread among the female labourers; the strike movements left an indelible impression on their minds. Some of them emerged as local leaders. Deserted by her husband, Jamuna Oraoni, apparently unperturbed, moved from one garden to another, mobilizing male and female labourers, and receiving the acclaim of the *babus*. Over the years there had grown a nucleus of militants in the gardens. Most of the trade unionists told us that the female labourers' faith in the trade union had remained undiminished. One may say that the trade union movement and the women's movement had become one and indivisible in the tea gardens.

As Renu Chakravarty, drawing on her experience in the women's movement, tells us: "... the communist women brought into the stream of the women's movement the toiling masses of women ... it gave a new turn and outlook to the entire movement ... For the first time the peasants, wor-

kers, the downtrodden in the *bustees* in urban areas, the agricultural labouring women, lower middle class women, side by side with lower middle class intellectuals and students—all converged into a massive stream.... It was no longer a question of doing charity for the poor, opening sewing centres, homes, schools, ... What became imperative was the building of a movement which questioned the very basis of a society founded on exploitation, inequality and indignity. It sought a socio-economic transformation of society.”<sup>1</sup>

What Renu Chakravarty does not tell us is that the women's movement carried forward the tradition built by the tribal women whose role in peasant revolts as well as agrarian movements represented what could be called the communal process of mass mobilization. Unlike caste Hindu or Muslim women, the tribal women were the first to join peasant revolts along with their menfolk. In the Santal rebellion of 1855-56, there were at least forty-five Santal women kept in Birbhum Jail; thirteen of these women were released, while others were jailed; most of these women acted “as the eyes and ears of the rebel forces”.<sup>2</sup> The *Ulgulan* led by Birsa Munda stirred the women. When Gaya Munda and his followers returned home after raiding the police station at Etkedih, “their women turned out to greet them and wash their feet with water”; women accompanied their menfolk on Sail Rakab hill where the peasants offered a last ditch battle; two hundred Mundas including women were killed in police firing.<sup>3</sup> The tradition of tribal women's militancy did not die out. In the Bardoli satyagraha movement, tribal women composed songs, looked after the fields when their husbands were arrested and often followed their men to the court and the railway station. The Congress mounted forest satyagraha in the Central Provinces in 1930 which spread to Nagpur and Jabalpur; large numbers of tribal women who came with their children took part in it, and refused “to give evidence or any help to the Police and Forest Officers”.<sup>4</sup> It was not fortuitous that tribal women were drawn in the communist-led movements. The Santal and Oraon women rose in struggle in hundreds of villages during the Tebhaga movement. When the police fired on the peasants at Khanpur, Hopan Mardi



was shot ; he was followed by Kausalya Kamrani, a tribal girl, who was also killed. Mangro Oraoni accompanied the peasants who tried to remove paddy stored in the landlord's *khamar* at Meteli in Jalpaiguri district and was killed in police firing ; she was then twenty-five. Thousands of Hajong women played a prominent role in the Tanka movement that flared up in north Mymansingh ; Rasimani, while chasing the police, was killed. As we have already noted, the Santal women were mobilized in the Naxalbari struggle ; seven women including tribal women were killed in police firing. It is worth noting that in Midnapore and 24-Parganas the tribal women were in the forefront of the land struggles organized by the Kisan Sabhas in 1969-70. As the sociologists tell us, there was growing social awakening among the tribal peasants.

We have indulged in this digression to show how the women's movement became linked with the tribal women that constituted the most exploited section in rural society. On the one hand there was large-scale land alienation in tribal villages ; on the other hand, massive deforestation created an environmental and ecological revolution to which the tribal peasants, who looked upon the forests as their home, could not adapt. After the coming of independence, deforestation continued unabated ; in the past thirty years nearly 4.5 million hectares of forest land had been destroyed. The intense discontent of tribal peasants was revealed in the Chipko movement, a movement of tribal women, that flared up almost spontaneously in northern India, whose object was to save the forests. One may say that there is a continuity in the protest movements of tribal women who have been severely hit by ecological changes from the nineteenth century onwards.

It seems that politicization of the working women steadily increased over the years. Partly this explains why all the major political parties set up their women's fronts : *Pradesh Congress Mahila Samiti* (Congress), *Nikhil Banga Mahila Sangha* (Revolutionary Socialist Party), *Mahila Sanskritik Sangha* (Socialist Unity Centre), *Aragami Mahila Samiti* (Forward Bloc). In the recent period the Naxalites set up *Nari Mukti Samiti*. The CPI-dominated *Mahila Samiti*, which grew out of the MARS in 1959, continued to work among the working

women in cooperation with the NFIW, focussing on price rise, unemployment among women, dowry system, danger of nuclear war. After the split in the CPI, the CPI(M) formed *Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti* in 1971; its membership leaped from 82,552 in 1974 to 236,991 in 1978-79, and to 600,000 in 1981-82. Of the 703 delegates who attended the state conference of this organization in the summer of 1979, 578 delegates came from the middle class, 54 from working class families, 34 from peasant families and 37 delegates from agricultural labourers.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, leadership remained in the hands of middle class women who had some education and were considered to be effective in mobilizing women. It is not clear whether these leaders could raise the movement to a higher level.

In her survey on the politicisation of women in West Bengal, Nirmala Banerjee writes that young middle class women, with no experience of the nationalist movement, generally show lower degree of interest in politics and are often disillusioned about the political leadership.<sup>6</sup> This seems to be a gloomy prognostication. Probably her survey is based on the women coming from affluent families living in Calcutta; these women are certainly becoming colourless and apolitical. They seldom join political organizations. When we turn to the women coming from the lower ranges of the middle class, we find that some crucial changes have occurred in the behaviour and life style of young women. With increasing urbanisation and economic hardship, the young women are having a variety of roles and life styles; remaining single, deferring marriage, postponing child bearing, getting more education, looking for jobs, building careers. In the recent period, these young women, ignoring the opposition of the most backward and obscurantist forces, have joined women's organizations. During the struggle for independence the intelligentsia played the leading role in the women's movement. Most of the "*Didis*" of MARS have become old or inactive; and the vacuum has been filled by the average-educated women. While the intelligentsia seem to feel that the fires of passion in the movement have flickered out, the average-educated women, alert and pragmatic, have come to the forefront. At the grass roots level there are cadres

like Chabi Mandal of Sonarpur whom we have already met. In the wake of the agrarian movements an army of cadres have grown. This is one of the most significant effects of the women's movement in Bengal.

Some writers focus attention on the growth of autonomous women's movements in Andhra and Maharashtra which are not supported by the "two parliamentary communist parties". Gail Omvedt, for instance, seems to attach exaggerated importance to the autonomous movements: "The new trend that had set in was barely reflected in Delhi, in Bengal and north India, where women had low work participation and a more minor role in poor peasant struggle. Rather it was in Andhra, with the POW (Progressive Organization of Women), and in Maharashtra, with the Women's Liberation Struggle Conference, that the new ideas . . . found expression. And these were the states with the highest work participation of women as well as a high proportion of agricultural labourers. Correspondingly, the leadership of both the Andhra POW and the Maharashtra WLSC came from outside the two parliamentary communist parties."<sup>7</sup>

Since there has not been much serious study on the Andhra POW and the Maharashtra WLSC, it is difficult to say whether these have developed as enduring organizations that could carry on a sustained movement. What is the experience of the Shahada Movement on which Maria Mies has made a documented study? The Shahada movement, a movement of tribal women in Dhulia in Maharashtra, had considerable popular support; the *Shramik Sangathna* was founded and an agrarian programme was adopted; mass rallies and demonstrations were held in which tribal women played the most militant role. Faced with governmental repression the movement petered out. Maria Mies writes on the last phase of the movement: "All these positive aspects of the movement cannot, however, wipe away the fact that the organized masses proved to be powerless as soon as the ruling class as a whole reacted with systematic and direct repression on their demand . . . the movement had no connection with a political party which could have directed and coordinated a revolutionary struggle . . . This was partly due to the fact that the Marxists

in the movement were on the one hand disillusioned with the two parliamentary communist parties ... and on the other criticised the Maoist CPI(M) because of its adventurism."<sup>9</sup>

While Omvedt rightly draws attention to the weakness of agricultural labourers' movement in West Bengal which could partly be related to low work participation of women, she seems to underestimate the social impact made by agrarian movements on peasant women. It is worth noting that these movements were spearheaded by the rural poor; although rich peasants continued to occupy an important position within the Kisan Sabhas, the fact remains that thousands of sharecroppers, poor peasants and agricultural labourers participated in these movements. Looking back Lakshmibala Doloi, an agricultural labourer in a Midnapore village, told us: "I have not received an acre of land. But many who fought with me have obtained land. This makes me happy. I will stay with the communists for my entire life. I have sworn to Geeta Mukherjee that I will never work against the party. However, I also work for the CPI(M) when it comes to me."

This is what the women's movement meant for the rural poor.

### Notes

1. Chakravarty, op. cit., pp. 220, 227.
2. R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 1983, pp. 131-32.
3. S. Singh, *Dust-storm and Hanging Mist*, 1966, pp. 102, 116.
4. D. E. W. Baker, *Changing Political Leadership in an Indian Province: The Central Provinces and Berar, 1919-39*, 1980, pp. 135-38.
5. *Annual Report of Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti*, 1980.
6. N. Banerjee, *Politicisation of Women in West Bengal*, V. Mazumdar, ed. *Symbols of Power*, 1979.
7. G. Omvedt, op. cit.
8. M. Mies, *The Shahada Movement: a Peasant Movement in Maharashtra*, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 3, No. 4, July, 1976.



## *Biographical Notes*

### *A. ACTIVISTS IN STUDENTS' AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS*

**Renu Chakravorty**, b. 1917 in an opulent Brahmo family ; educated at Cambridge ; came in contact with the British Communist movement in 1937-39 ; Joined CPI in 1942 ; leader of Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti ; went underground in 1948 when the CPI was banned ; member of Parliament, 1952-67 ; minister in United Front Government in West Bengal, 1969 ; General Secretary of NFIW ; married Nikhil Chakravorty, a Marxist intellectual educated at Oxford.

**Manikuntala Sen**, b. 1912, daughter of a Baidya lawyer of Barisal (now in Bangladesh) ; joined student and women's movements in 1938 ; leader of Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti ; moved in the districts organizing women's movement ; in Jail, 1948-1952 ; elected to Legislative Assembly as a Communist candidate in 1952 ; retired from active politics in 1962 when the CPI was split ; married Jolly Kaul, a Kashmiri Communist leader.

**Kamala Mukherjee**, b. 1913, daughter of a revolutionary who was associated with M. N. Roy ; joined nationalist and revolutionary movements in the 1930s ; in Jail, 1932-38 ; activist in student and women's movements in the 1940s ; builder of Nari Seva Sangha ; jailed in 1948 ; married a Brahmin University Professor in 1944 ; M.A. in 1956 ; edited *Mandira*.

**Latika Sen**, b. 1911 in a middleclass family of Dacca (now in Bangladesh) ; educated at Dacca University ; became associated with the revolutionaries ; joined CPI in 1938 ; married Dr. Ranen Sen, communist leader in 1939 ; leader of Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti in the 1940s ; when the CPI was declared illegal and many communists were thrown in Jail, Latika led women's demonstration in April, 1949 demanding their release and was killed in police firing.

**Bela Lahiri**, b. 1917 in a middle class Brahmin family in Barisal (now in Bangladesh) ; a school teacher in Calcutta ;

joined the illegal Communist Party in 1938 and worked in the secret apparatus of the party, 1938-41; Secretary, West Bengal State Mahila Samiti, 1953; activist in women's movement till her death in 1982; married Somnath Lahiri, communist leader.

**Kanak Mukherjee**, b. 1921 in a Baidya family of Jessore (now in Bangladesh); educated at Bethune College; prominent in student movement, 1939-41; joined CPI and worked underground in 1941-42; became prominent in Women's movement in the 1940s; in Jail, 1950-51; lecturer in English in Women's College, Calcutta; edited *Gharey Bairey* and *Eksathe*; member Rajya Sabha, 1978; married Saroj Mukherjee, communist leader.

**Sudha Ray**, b. 1914 in a Kayastha landlord family of Faridpur (now in Bangladesh); joined student and labour movements in the 1930s; school teacher, 1932-58; activist in Women's movement from 1943; member of AIWC; Vice-Chairman, NFIW, 1954-82; concentrates now on social work; founder member, Mahila Sanskritik Sammelan; jailed in 1954; Chairman, Social Welfare Board, 1969-73.

**Sova Majumdar**, b. 1920, grand daughter of Ambika Majumdar, Congress President; educated at Calcutta University; joined M. N. Roy's Radical Democratic Party; activist in student movement, 1940-47; married Dharitri Ganguly, a leading Royist; left politics in 1948.

**Geeta Banerjee**, b. 1920, in an affluent family; educated at Scottish Church College; activist in student movement, 1940-46; lived in working class area in Budge Budge; married Subhas Mukherjee, the Marxist poet; lost interest in politics in the 1960s.

**Santi Pradhan**, b. 1912, in a nationalist family; joined Jugantar group of revolutionaries; jailed in 1933; joined Communist Party in 1940; activist in MARS, 1944-48; became passive since 1952; married Sudhi Pradhan, Marxist intellectual.

**Juiphul Ray**, b. 1920, in a middle class family in Barisal; an activist in women's movement since 1944, who toured Bengal districts; married Khoka Ray, communist leader.

**Geeta Mukherjee**, b. 1924, in a Kayastha family of Jessore (now in Bangladesh); daughter of a leading lawyer; educated at Asutosh College and Calcutta University; prominent in student movement, 1942-49; went underground in 1948 when the CPI was declared illegal; worked among peasants in Midnapur district from 1952 onwards; elected to Legislative Assembly in 1967, 1969, 1971; elected to Parliament in 1980; married Biswanath Mukherjee, communist leader; elected to Parliament, 1985.

**Pankaj Acharya**, b. 1924, in an orthodox Brahmin family in Rajsahi (now in Bangladesh); had to leave her home as she joined student and women's movements in 1939; married a full-time trade unionist and took up teaching in a Calcutta School; M.A., B.T.; continued to work in teachers' association till her death in 1982.

**Dr. Alaka Chatterjee**, b. 1926 in a Kayastha family, daughter of a government officer; mobilized peasant women in Dinajpur district in 1942-43; General Secretary, All Bengal Girl Students' Association, 1944-50; in Jail, 1949-51; M.A., Ph.D.; took up teaching in a Calcutta College in 1951; married Debiprasad Chatteerjee, Marxist intellectual.

**Ila Mitra**, b. 1925, in a middle class Baidya family, mobilized tribal women in a militant struggle in Nachole (now in Bangladesh) in 1949-50; severe repression in the village as four policemen were killed; arrested and tortured; in East Pakistan Jail, 1950-55; member of Legislative Assembly, 1962-72; lecturer in City College since 1962; married a full-time activist in peasant movement.

**Rani Das Gupta**, b. 1925, in a middle class Kayastha family in Dinajpur (now in Bangladesh); participated in Tebhaga Movement, 1946-47; worked among peasant women, 1949-50; school teacher; activist in women's movement; married a Baidya trade unionist; childless.

**Bina Guha**, b. 1923, daughter of a Baidya lawyer of Dinajpur (now in Bangladesh); participated in Tebhaga Movement, 1946-47; prominent leader of West Bengal Provincial Mahila Samiti since 1972; married a peasant leader and journalist; Secretary, West Bengal Mahila Samiti.

**Kalyani Das Gupta**, b. 1922, in a nationalist middle class family in Jalpaiguri; joined student movement in 1939; activist in women's movement in Jalpaiguri district since 1942; worked among peasants and tea garden labourers; inactive since 1952 after the death of her only daughter; began to take interest in women's movement in late 1960s; married Sachin Das Gupta, communist leader of Jalpaiguri.

**Nirupama Chatterjee**, b. 1934, daughter of a railway employee, joined student movement when she was in school; mobilized peasant women of Howrah in land struggles during 1949-50; in Jail, 1950; activist in women's movement in Bagnan, Howrah in the 1950s; elected to Legislative Assembly from Bagnan in 1967, 1971, 1977; minister of Left Front Government, 1982.

**Dr. Ila Basu**, b. 1925, in a middle class family of Calcutta; drawn in student movement in 1946-47 when she was a student in Medical College; mobilized peasant women in land struggle in remote villages in Kakdwip in 1949-50; lost interest in politics in the 1960s; took up medical profession; married a college teacher.

**Dr. Bina Ray**, b. 1925, activist in student movement, 1942-47; in Jail, 1948-50; M.A., Jh.D.; joined Indian Statistical Institute in 1952 and gradually drifted away from political movement in the 1960s; married a college teacher, who was an activist in Bengal student movement.

**Uma Sehanobish**, b. 1920, in a Brahmo family, daughter of a college teacher; educated at Bethune College and Calcutta University; went underground along with her brother, Nikhil Chakravarty, when the CPI was declared illegal in 1948; continued to take interest in peace and cultural movements from 1952 onwards; worked as a school teacher and founded '*Path Bhavan*' which grew into a leading school; married Chinmohan Sehanobish, a Brahmo and prominent leader of cultural movements.

**Meera Chatterjee**, b. 1926, in a middle class family of Darjeeling; educated at Calcutta University; activist in student movement, 1944-47; in Jail, 1948-50; school teacher; con-



tinues to be active in teachers' movement; married a Marxist economist, now a member of Parliament.

**Bani Das Gupta**, b. 1923, in a Baidya family of Barisal (now in Bangladesh); joined student movement when she was a student of Barisal College, left home in the face of severe opposition from the family; B.A., B.T.; school teacher for a few years; became prominent in women's movement in the 1950s; joint secretary, NFIW, 1976; married Prabhat Das Gupta, prominent student leader and journalist.

**Priti Banerjee**, b. 1923 in a middle class Brahmin family of Faridpur (now in Bangladesh), sister of Abani Lahiri, peasant leader; joined students' movement in 1940; organiser of MARS in Pabna and Howrah; despite mother's opposition continued to be active in women's movement; in Jail, 1949-51; married Kali Banerjee, film star, in 1951; gradually left politics and became a housewife.

**Maya Lahari**, b. 1924, daughter of an educationist; was drawn in women's movement in Pabna (now in Bangladesh) when she was a college student; elected to MARS Council in 1944; settled in Delhi in the 1950s and became associated with NFIW; married Abani Lahiri, prominent peasant leader; continues to work in NFIW.

**Chinu Chakravarty**, b. 1926, in a middle class family in Mymansingh; activist in student movement, 1946-51; school teacher; activist in teachers' movement.

**Vidya Kanuga**, b. 1924, in an affluent family; educated in England; joined student movement, 1948; activist in women's movement since 1952; married Sunil Munsu, Marxist intellectual.

**Sipra Sarkar**, b. 1928, in a Brahmo family; daughter of Sushovan Sarkar, distinguished Marxist historian; educated at Calcutta University where she received a 'first' in modern history; drawn to the underground Communist Party in 1948; joined the Party in 1951; activist in teachers' movement; Reader in History, Jadavpur University.

**Bela Banerjee**, b. 1928, in a middle class family; activist in student movement, 1948-50; jailed in 1950; joined Indian

Statistical Institute in 1955; takes interest in women's movement, though politically passive.

**Naseema Banoo**, b. 1931, in an affluent Muslim family in Barisal, her father was a nephew of A. K. Fazlul Huq; educated at Calcutta University; activist in student movement; joined Communist Party in 1951 and CPI(M) in 1964; school teacher since 1955; activist in teachers' movement; married Amalendu De, her class-mate and now Professor of History, Jadavpur University.

**Sujata Sen**, b. 1933, in a middle class family connected with nationalist as well as communist movements; educated at Calcutta University; activist in student movement; joined Communist Party in 1953; a school teacher and activist in teachers' movement.

**Chaya Das Gupta**, b. 1936, in a middle class family of Jalpaiguri; a few members of the family were active in revolutionary movement of the 1930s; became an activist in the women's movement in the district in 1953; came to Calcutta and took a lecturer's job in City College; married a Brahmo college teacher who took part in communist movement in Jalpaiguri.

**Prativa Mukherjee**, b. 1934, in a middle class family in Birbhum; joined Socialist Unity Centre and worked among peasants in her district; elected to Legislative Assembly in 1967; minister, United Front Government.

**Sipra Bhowmik**, b. 1946; joined student movement and was drawn to CPI(M) in 1963; school teacher and activist in women's movement in Calcutta; married a leader of CPI(M); d. 1982.

**Saswati Ghosh**, b. 1959, in a middle class family; Ph.D. student in Economics; activist in student movement; organizer of Pragatisil Mahila Samiti, a left-oriented organization.

**Hemprava Majumdar**, b. 1888 in a middle class family in Noakhali (now in Bangladesh); married Bananta Kumar Majumdar, Congress leader in Coomilla; joined Non-Cooperation movement in 1921 under his instruction; participated in Civil Disobedience movement in 1930 along with her two

daughters; elected to Legislative Assembly in 1937; retired from politics in the 1950s; d. 1962.

**Urmila Devi**, b. 1883, in an upper middle class Baidya family; educated at Loreto Convent, Calcutta; married Ananta Narayan Sen, who died in 1920; sister of C. R. Das, she joined Non-cooperation movement in 1920 and was sent to Jail; set up Nari Satyagraha Samiti in 1930; gave up politics in the 1940s; d. 1956.

**Jyotirmayee Ganguli**, b. 1889, daughter of Dr. Kadambini Ganguli, first woman graduate of Calcutta University who became a lady doctor; took part in Civil Disobedience movement in 1930 and moved in the districts, addressing meetings; jailed in 1932; president of MARS in 1945; joined student demonstration in Calcutta on 21 November, 1945; killed in an accident next day when she was leading the funeral procession of the students.

**Nellie Sen Gupta**, b. 1886, at Cambridge, England; married J. M. Sen Gupta; addressed an unlawful assembly at Delhi in 1931 and sent to Jail; elected president of the Calcutta Congress in 1933 and arrested; elected Alderman, Calcutta Corporation, 1936; elected to Assembly, 1940, 1946; President, MARS, 1942; lived in Pakistan after partition; d. 1973.

**Labanyaprava Datta**, b. 1888 in a Baisnab Zamindar family; joined Civil Disobedience movement in the 1930s and was jailed; president of Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, 1941.

**Bimalprativa Devi**, b. 1901, in a rich family of Nadia; married Dr. Charu Banerjee; took part in Civil Disobedience movement and became connected with the Bengal revolutionaries; arrested in 1931 and remained in Jail for six years; left Congress, 1940; in Jail, 1941-45.

**Lila Roy**, b. 1900, in a Kayastha family, daughter of a Deputy Magistrate; educated at Bethune College and Dacca University; joined Sri Sangha, a revolutionary society of Dacca and married Anil Roy, leader of this society, in 1939; edited *Jayasree* and popularised radical ideas among women; in Jail, 1931-37; a devoted follower of Subhas Bose who joined the

Forward Bloc ; in Jail, 1942-46 ; member of Constituent Assembly ; joined Congress, 1949 and continued to take interest in the political movement till her death in 1970.

**Dr. Phulrenu Guha**, b. 1911, came in contact with the Yugantar group of revolutionaries when she was a student ; joined Labour Party and married Biresh Guha, noted scientist ; M.A., D.Litt. ; worked in AIWC and became prominent in women's movement ; elected to Parliament, 1985.

**Purabi Mukherjee**, b. 1923, educated at Bethune College and Scottish Church College ; came in contact with the Yugantar group of revolutionaries ; joined the Congress and became prominent in the 1950s ; member, Legislative Assembly 1952-68 ; minister of state, 1957-62 ; member, Rajya Sabha, 1970.

**Santi Kabir**, b. 1905, educated at Calcutta University ; joined Satyagraha Samiti in 1930 ; jailed in 1931 ; married Humayun Kabir in 1932, and took interest in nationalist movement.

**Renuka Ray**, b. 1904, in a Brahmo family ; educated in England ; activist in AIWC : member, Legislative Assembly, 1952-57 ; married S. N. Ray, ICS.

**Manjusree Chatterjee**, b. 1907, in Jorasanko Tagore family ; educated at Santiniketan ; President of MARS, 1948 ; jailed in 1949 ; married K. P. Chatterjee, distinguished nationalist and University teacher ; took interest in women's movement till her death in 1983.

**Abha Maiti**, b. 1925, daughter of Nikunja Maiti, veteran leader of the Congress, minister and member of Parliament ; joined Quit India movement of 1942 ; became President of Midnapore Congress Committee, 1960 ; elected to Legislative Assembly 1952, 1960 ; left the Congress, joined Janata Party, and became a minister in Central Government, 1977-79.

**Gouri Ayyub**, b. 1931, daughter of D. N. Datta, University Professor of Patna ; activist in student movement, 1948-49 ; became a lecturer in a Calcutta College and married Abu Syed Ayyub facing social opposition ; takes interest in social work and believes in the preservation of human rights.



## B. THE REVOLUTIONARIES

**Bina Das**, b. 1911, in a Brahmo family, daughter of Benimadhav Das, Headmaster of a school; educated at Bethune College; joined revolutionary movement and fired at Stanley Jackson, Bengal's Governor, on 6 February, 1932, when he was delivering Convocation address; sentenced to nine years' imprisonment; participated in the Quit India movement in 1942 and was jailed; member, Legislative Assembly, 1946-51; married Jyotis Bhowmick, a revolutionary of Yugantar group; takes interest in social work.

**Kamala Das Gupta**, b. 1907, in a rich Vaidya family of Vikrampur, Dacca (now in Bangladesh), daughter of a journalist who was on the staff of *Bengalee*, founded by Surendranath Banerjee; educated at Calcutta University; M.A. in 1929; joined the Yugantar group, kept bombs, and passed on a revolver to Bina Das; jailed in 1933; joined Congress in 1938 and took part in the Quit India movement in 1942 and was arrested; edited *Mandira*.

**Kalpana Datta**, b. 1913, in a middle class Kayastha family of Chittagong (now in Bangladesh); daughter of a government officer; educated at Bethune College; joined the Chittagong revolutionary group led by Surya Sen and worked underground evading police hunt after the Armoury Raid (April, 1930); maintained contact with the revolutionaries; arrested in a village in May, 1933 after an armed encounter with the police and brutally beaten; while Surya Sen and Tarakeswar Dastidar were hanged, Kalpana was sentenced to transportation for life; joined CPI in 1942 and took part in popular movements in Chittagong; married P. C. Joshi, communist leader, in 1943; settled in Delhi in the 1960s.

**Santi Ghosh**, b. 1916, daughter of a college teacher of Coomilla (now in Bangladesh); came in contact with the Yugantar group when she was in school; in the winter of 1931 she along with her class-mate Suniti shot dead Stevens, District Magistrate of Coomilla, was arrested and tortured; member, Legislative Assembly; married with two children.

**Suniti Chaudhuri**, b. 1917, daughter of a government employee; came in contact with the revolutionaries of Coomilla and accompanied Santi in Stevens' bungalow; arrested and tortured as a Division III prisoner; took M.B.B.S. degree and entered medical profession; lost interest in politics and married a trade unionist in 1947.

**Pritilata Waddedar**, b. 1911, in a poor Kayastha family of Chittagong, daughter of a clerk in the District Magistrate's office; educated at Bethune college; member, *Chatri Sangha*, Calcutta; joined the Chittagong group of revolutionaries, led the attack on the European Club of Chittagong in the autumn of 1932, and committed suicide after her comrades escaped.

**Ujjala Majumdar**, b. 1914, in a landowner's family in Dacca (now in Bangladesh); joined Bengal Volunteer group of revolutionaries and took part in the shooting of Johna Anderson, Bengal's governor, at Darjeeling in May, 1934; although she managed to escape from Darjeeling she was soon arrested in her secret shelter in Calcutta; in Jail till 1939; arrested during the Quit India movement, in Jail 1942-46; joined Forward Bloc; married a former revolutionary in 1948 and took up social work.

### C. RURAL WOMEN AND FEMALE LABOURERS

**Matangini Hazra**, b. 1870, in a peasant family of Tamluk, Midnapore district; although illiterate she joined the Congress; became widow when she was eighteen years old; took part in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-32 and was jailed; during the Quit India movement of 1942 she led a peasants' demonstration to capture the Court and Police station of Tamluk and was killed in police firing.

**Bimala Maji**, b. 1929, in a Mahisya peasant family in Midnapore; emerged as a local leader during Tebhaga Movement, 1946-47; took part in the militant movement of 1949-50 and was jailed for two years; inside Jail she, although pregnant, joined the hunger strike of women prisoners who demanded that they should be treated as political prisoners

instead of as ordinary convicts; gradually lost interest in peasant movement partly for frustration, and also for political differences with the CPI leadership; married a local Kisan Sabha leader; mother of five children.

**Gangamani Pattanayak**, b. 1903, in a Mahisya peasant family of Midnapore; took part in Salt satyagraha, 1930-32 and was arrested; joined CPI in the 1940s and was drawn in no rent movement; arrested in 1948-49 after Chaitanya Samanta and Sudhir Nayek were killed in police firing; remained active in the 1960s; lost her husband within a few years after her marriage and personally looked after her husband's land.

**Charushila Jana**, b. 1903, joined Salt Satyagraha, 1930-32, in Midnapore district, became a Gandhite along with her husband and lived in an *ashrama*; mobilized peasant women of Satahata during the Quit India movement, 1942; jailed three times; gave up politics after independence.

**Rajbala Pattanayak**, b. 1920, in a Mahisya peasant family; received primary education; joined CPI and took part in land struggles in Panskura, Midnapore district during 1949-50, along with her husband; active in the Mahila Samiti in the 1960s.

**Chabi Panigrahi**, b. 1945, in a Brahmin family of Panskura, Midnapore, wife of a railway employee; literate; joined Mahila Samiti in 1968 and took part in women's movements for better wages of agricultural labour, recording of the bargadars, equal pay for equal work.

**Lakshmibala Doloi**, b. 1920, in a scheduled caste family of Chakdwip, Midnapore; an agricultural labourer who was married at an early age and drawn in the communist-led peasant movement in the 1950s; slapped a landlord's son as he was trying to disrupt a peasants' meeting and took part in the movement for the occupation of *benami* land; mother of three daughters who also work as agricultural labourers; continues to take interest in women's movement.

**Giribala Seth**, b. 1919, in a scheduled caste peasant family of Haldia in Midnapore; joined Salt Satyagraha in 1930-31

under the inspiration of her husband ; took part in the burning of Sutahata police station in 1942 and later joined Tebhaga Movement ; mother of three sons and four daughter ; one of her sons (CPM) elected to Legislative Assembly from Sutahata ; became inactive as the family had become large.

**Sushilbala Malua**, b. 1940, in a scheduled caste family of Haldia, Midnapore ; received primary education ; a poor peasant who was drawn in land struggle along with her husband ; took part in meetings and demonstrations held in other villages ; landlords harassed her by filing cases ; now politically passive.

**Jyotsna Bhowmick**, b. 1928, in a Mahisya landlord's family of Tamluk, Midnapore ; married at an early age in a middle peasant family, had to do all kinds of house work ; as her husband, now a Cabinet minister, joined CPI, she was drawn in land struggle in 1949 when the party was declared illegal ; in Jail, 1950 ; took part in hunger strike within Jail ; mother of two children ; gradually became passive as she had to look after a large family and bring up her children.

**Punneswari Debba**, b. 1887, in a Rajbansi peasant family of Debiganje, Jalpaiguri ; an illiterate poor widow, she was drawn in peasant movement, gave shelter to Kisan Sabha workers, and took part in the Tebhaga movement, 1946-47 ; continued to be a supporter of the Kisan Sabha when repression came in 1948-50 ; d. 1952.

**Mangro Uraoni**, b. 1922, in a tribal peasant family of Meteli, Jalpaiguri ; took part in the Tebhaga Movement and joined the peasants who tried to remove paddy stored in the granary of a local landlord ; killed in police firing along with seven peasants.

**Poko Uraoni**, b. 1932, in a tribal peasant family ; took part in the Tebhaga Movement, along with her brother when she was very young ; married Arjun Oraon, peasant leader of Meteli ; deserted by Arjun she began to look after Turia Oraon's child and later married him ; remained active in the 1950s ; an agricultural labourer who has to look after her ailing husband, while continuing to take interest in popular movements.



**Bhandani Burman**, b. 1922, in a poor Rajbansi peasant family of Ransisankail, Dinajpur; joined Kisan Sabha along with her husband and became prominent during Tebhaga Movement, 1946-47; although repression was intense she evaded police hunt and continued to be active; joined peasant demonstration in 1948 when the CPI was declared illegal; d. 1949.

**Yasodarani Sarkar**, b. 1917, in a Kayastha family, married Nilkantha Das, a middle peasant; joined Kisan Sabha as her husband became an activist; mother of two children she joined the peasant demonstration at Khanpur, West Dinajpur, during the Tebhaga Movement and was killed in police firing.

**Kausalya Kamrani**, b. 1918, in a tribal peasant family; along with tribal women took part in the Tebhaga Movement of 1946-47; joined the peasant demonstration at Khanpur and was killed in police firing.

**Prabharani Das**, b. 1925, married Nani Das of Patiram, West Dinajpur at an early age; her father-in-law Krishnadas Mohanto, rich peasant and Baisnab, as well as her husband were connected with revolutionary movement; as they joined CPI, she became an activist in the Mahila Samiti of Patiram and faced hardship during Tebhaga Movement when her father-in-law and husband were jailed; became gradually passive, as economic conditions of the family worsened.

**Swarajnandini Sarkar**, b. 1931, daughter of Krishnadas Mohanto; was drawn in Mahila Samiti as her husband, Kali Sarkar, was prominent in Kisan Sabha and a leader of Tebhaga Movement; lived in poverty as her husband was jailed; continues to be a supporter of Mahila Samiti.

**Pakhibala (Mandakini) Sinha**, b. 1931, in a Mahisya peasant family; received primary education, married Amiya Sinha, a middle peasant, when she was sixteen years old; was an activist in the militant struggle in Kakdwip, 1949-50; continued to be active when her husband was jailed; remains a supporter of CPI, although she has not been allotted any land in the distribution of vested land and earns her living working as a maid servant or selling milk in the local market.

**Ahalya Das**, b. 1908, in a scheduled caste peasant family of Kakdwip, 24-Parganas, married Jogen Das of Chandanpiri, centre of the militant struggle of 1949-50; along with her husband, joined peasant demonstration that faced a contingent of armed police; as she was in the forefront of the demonstration, she was the first to be killed in police firing; mother of two daughters and one son.

**Chabi Mandol**, b. 1940, in a Rajbansi peasant family of Sonarpur, 24-Parganas; an illiterate widow who worked as agricultural labourer; took part in the land struggle of 1967 when *benami* land of landlords was occupied by peasants; received 2 bighas in land distribution undertaken by the government in 1978; mother of three sons and one daughter who went to primary school; continues to be active in women's organisation; elected to the Panchayat in 1983.

**Chaya Bera**, b. 1942, in a peasant family of Midnapore; joined peasant and women's movement in the 1970s; member, Legislative Assembly 1982 and minister of Social Welfare.

**Jamuna Oraon**, b. 1913, in a tribal peasant family of Jaipairguri; a tea garden labourer who joined the Tebhaga Movement, 1946-47; took part in the land struggles, 1967-69; activist in tea garden labourers' movement who emerged as a local leader.

**Sreemati Munda**, b. 1900, illiterate tribal woman who was an agricultural labourer; mobilized tribal women of Sonarpur, 24-Parganas in land struggles in 1967, 1969, 1977; faced repression in 1972 when Emergency was declared; became passive due to old age.

**Mabukta Khatun**, b. 1953, illiterate Muslim woman who earned her living as a *bidi* worker; drawn in land struggles in Ragnan, Howrah; activist in Mahila Ganatantrik Samiti despite severe social opposition; organized adult literacy centres.

**Suniti Biswakarma**, b. 1948, in a tribal family; a sharecropper who also worked as an agricultural labourer; her family involved in the militant peasant movement in Naxalbari; gave shelter to underground comrades and took cooked food for them in the forests; activist in Nari Mukti Samity that campaigns for better wages and equal pay for equal work.

**Nayaneswari Mallick**, b. 1944, in a sharecroppers' family ; an activist in Naxalbari movement who mobilised women in meetings and demonstrations ; killed in police firing in May, 1967, when she was trying to organize a rally.

**Dhaneswari Singh**, b. 1944, in a Rajbansi peasant family ; came to politics under the influence of her husband ; took part in meetings and demonstrations that became frequent in Naxalbari in 1967 ; killed in police firing in May, 1967.

## Abbreviations

AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress.
AIWC	All India Women's Conference.
CPI	Communist Party of India.
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist).
CPI(ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).
CITU	Centre of Indian Trade Unions.
FB	Forward Bloc.
HMS	Hind Mazdoor Sabha.
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress.
MARS	Mahila Atmarakha Samiti.
NFIW	National Federation of Indian Women.
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party.
SUC	Socialist Unity Centre.
UTUC	United Trade Union Congress.
TPA	Tea Planters Association.

## Glossary

adivasi	—tribal people.
anna	—one-sixteenth of a rupee.
bargadar	—sharecropper.
bidi	—type of cheap cigarette.
bigha	—one-third of an acre.
cha bagan	—tea garden.
charka	—spinning wheel.
chowkidar	—village watchman.
chowkidari tax	—tax imposed by the government for the maintenance of the village watchman.
crore	—ten million.
cutchery	—village court of the Zamindar.
dadán	—advance made to the peasant on hypothecation of crop.
dheki	—rice husking pedal operated by women.



didī	—elder sister.
gherao	—siege.
hat	—village market.
jenmī	—landlord.
hartal	—protest strike observed by shopkeepers, students, lawyers and government employees.
karja	—paddy loan.
jotedar	—landlord holding land under the Zamindar often with land leased out to sharecroppers.
khamar	—threshing floor.
kholan	—granary where paddy is stored.
Kisan	—peasant.
Kisan Sabha	—peasant association.
lakh	—one hundred thousand.
lathi	—stick.
lotdar	—landlord, farmer of revenue in 24-Parganas.
mahajan	—moneylender.
mahalwari	—system of land revenue settlement in which demand was levied on mahals or villages.
maund	—a measure equivalent to 82½ lb.
mazdur	—labourer.
panchayat	—village council.
purdah	—veil, seclusion.
patta	—title deed given to the revenue payer.
patni	—under tenure in a Zamindari.
ryot	—tenant recognised by the government.
salt tax	—tax imposed by the government on salt for revenue purposes.
satyagraha	—form of non-violent campaign used by Gandhi during non-co-operation and civil disobedience movements.
sari	—cotton dress worn by women.
tanka	—fixed produce rent levied on tenants.
tebhaga	—two-thirds share.

- terai —jungle country at the foothold of the Himalayas.
- union board tax —tax imposed by the government for the maintenance of village level administrative unit.
- zamindar —landlord, collector of land revenue on behalf of government.
- zamindari —an estate held in full proprietary right.

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